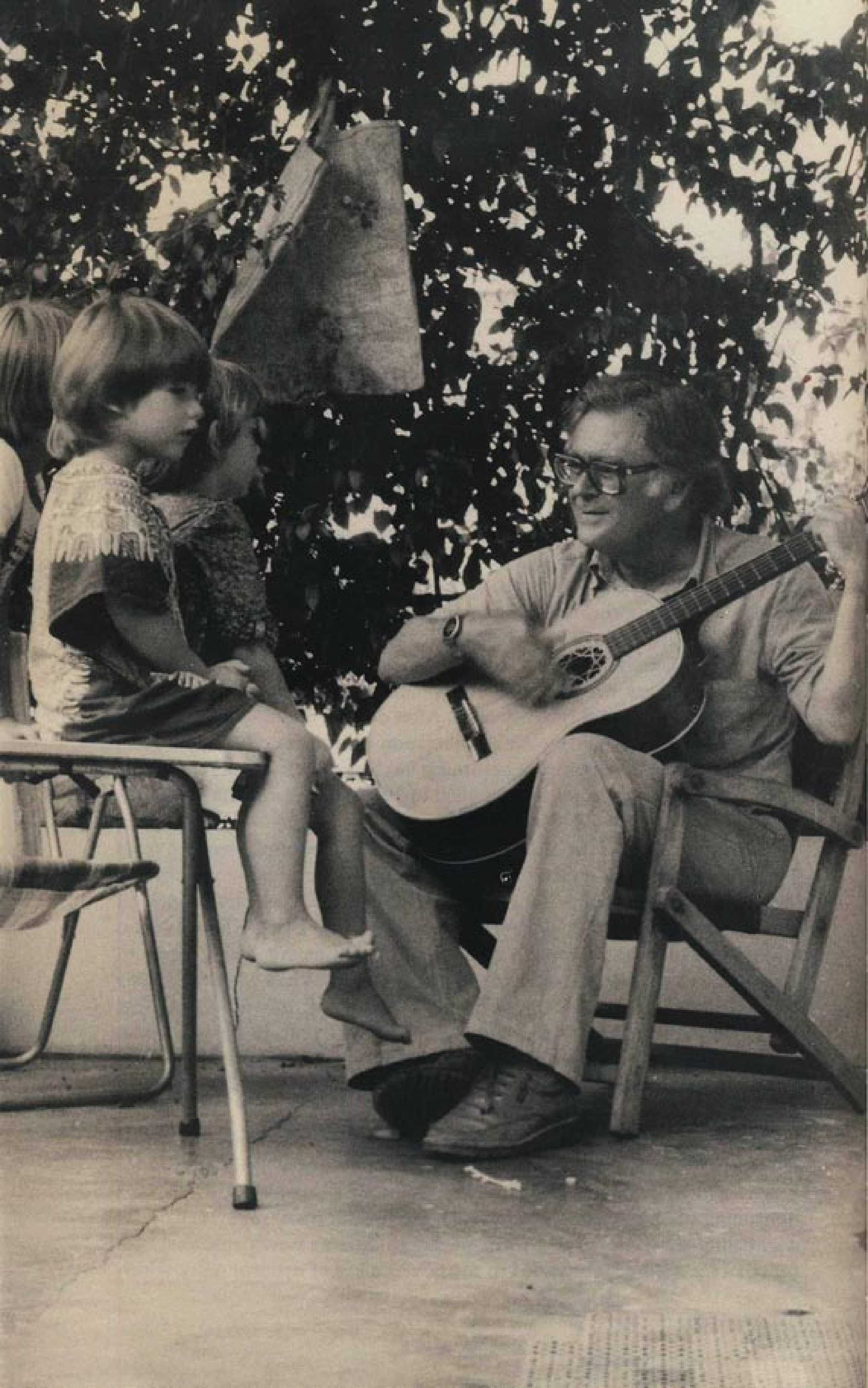
JOE SLOVO

Joe Slovo was one of the central figures behind South Africa's transformation, and one of apartheid's most enduring — and formidable — opponents. Born Yossel Mashel Slovo in Lithuania in 1926, he came to South Africa as a young child. He joined the Young Communist League in the early 1940s at the age of sixteen. He was forced to leave school because of poverty, worked as a dispatch clerk, and then volunteered to serve in Italy in the Sixth Brigade. After the war he was granted a scholarship to study law and won the best student prize. He subsequently established a legal practice in Johannesburg.

In 1949 he married Ruth First, a writer and major activist in her own right. Slovo was a central member of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) and a founder member of the white Congress of Democrats which allied itself to the ANC. In his earlier years he was a hardline Stalinist and one of the moving forces behind the splits and expulsions which shook the CPSA during the 1950s. Slovo was banned from political work in 1954, but continued his activities covertly. In 1963 he left the country on a mission for the ANC's military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), thus avoiding being arrested with the other Rivonia trialists. After doing a master's degree in law, he decided to work full-time for the liberation movement. He concentrated on building up MK, eventually becoming its chief of staff. He served on the ANC's revolutionary council from 1969 to 1983 and became the first white person to serve on the ANC's national executive.

Slovo spent time in the camps in Angola, and subsequently worked from Mozambique until his expulsion after the Nkomati Accord. He was revered in the camps, where he was known as *ijudi* (the non-racial Jewish white) — of crucial importance to those ANC cadres with a Black Consciousness background. He justly earned a reputation for listening, being open to dialogue, and having a wonderful sense of humour. When Moses Mabhida died in 1986, Slovo became general secretary of the South African Communist Party (SACP) and relinquished his MK post. In the same year, Ruth First was killed by a letter bomb arranged by the South African security forces. Slovo, however, survived bannings, treason trials and assassination attempts to return to South Africa in 1990.

In 1989 Slovo released his article 'Has Socialism Failed?' which denounced bureaucratic state socialism and supported a multiparty democracy with individual and collective freedoms and rights. In the wake of the ANC's unbanning, Slovo played one of the most important roles at Codesa, negotiating the path to, and form of, South Africa's new democracy: his proposal for a 'sunset clause' led to the government of national unity which



took South Africa through its first two years of democracy. Following the elections and the ANC's victory, Slovo was appointed minister of housing and he dedicated the final months of his life to building the foundation of a national housing policy and programme. He died of cancer in Johannesburg on 6 January 1995.

Helena Dolny, Slovo's second wife, worked as an agricultural economist at the Centre of African Studies of which Ruth First was director. She came to know Joe through Ruth and through some involvement in ANC special operations. She joined Slovo in Lusaka in 1987, and they married late that year. In 1990 she became part of the effort to launch the ANC Land Commission. Dolny remains involved in on-site development work as well as being closely involved in policy development on land redistribution and rural settlement.

A review, incorporating Slovo's autobiographical extracts[1] written between 1982 and 1983.
Helena Dolny
Johannesburg
March 1995

I wake up one morning thinking, 'What chutzpah for a goy to contemplate writing about her late husband's Jewishness!' Then I reflect on my choice of words and the fact that I have lived the last twenty-one years with Jo'burg Jewish males. The Portuguese would probably describe me as an *assimilado*, having imbibed a great deal of the culture in which I have been so intimately immersed. And there's also a substantial amount of Joe's writing, which reflects his Jewish roots, as well as my own diary of a trip that we made to Obelai (Obel), the village of his birth, in Lithuania in 1989. Perhaps this is a fair undertaking after all.

In his 1994 address to the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, Joe states clearly, 'My pedigree is not unconnected with Jewishness and even Zionism.' He refers to his experiences in the village ghetto, the Jewish Workers Club in Doornfontein and his membership of Hashomeyr Hatzair. From his religious origins he got the beginnings of a moral code; we had discussed this when making an application for my children to go to Sacred Heart School. The religious ritual and creed may or may not be rejected later in life but the moral code can provide a sturdy ethical foundation. From Joe's own religious

1 Published in full as *Slovo, The Unfinished Autobiography*, 1995, Ravan Press, Randburg, South Africa.

Left:
Public Uncle No 1: Joe Slovo serenades the Rabkin children

origins, as the extracts indicate, he also came to understand and reject religious bigotry. Whilst he didn't live in a ghetto, in the sense of a community living behind closed wooden doors (as I have seen the remnants of in Vilnius), he certainly lived in a ghetto-community steeped in bigotry. His deep-rootedness in his Jewish upbringing and culture emerge very clearly in the extracts I have chosen from his autobiographical writing. These extracts range from his early childhood and immigration to South Africa to the years preceding exile when he practised as a lawyer. The extracts also demonstrate his capacity as a raconteur and teller of jokes.

But what puzzles me as I begin to think about writing is the notion of 'Jewishness'. Ruth (Joe's late wife) was Jewish, my ex-husband Jewish, all my in-law and ex-in-law family as well as a couple of dozen work colleagues and comrades who have all had their bris and bar mitvah. Yet my sense is that Joe was somehow more Jewish than any of them. I place my puzzle before Barney Simon after a night at the theatre. 'Ah,' says Barney, 'but Joe was Yiddish, not Jewish as in the Jewishness of religion and Israel.' This is my answer. In trying to place people I know as 'more' or 'less' Jewish, what in fact I have been grappling with is the distinction between a typology of religious origin and my perception of the degree of their resonance with secular Yiddish culture.

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Joe Slovo's narrative . . .

Childhood

I always think of the village in which I was born as Obel and not Obelai, its real name. In the ghetto community in which we lived Yiddish was the mother (and for me the only) tongue. By the time I left at the age of ten I had learned only to count in Lithuanian and to sing the words of the national anthem, which ended with a claim for the return of Vilnius, the capital city, then still under Polish rule.

I have no idea whether it was out of choice or because of some legal or social bar that we were all kept away from the local schools. The synagogue was our school and an ear-twisting, sadistic rabbi forced whatever he could into our heads from the Hebrew version of the Old Testament, which was our only textbook. Lithuanian towns and cities were known to us not by their indigenous names but by Russian variants, which reflected the fact that Lithuania had been part of the Tsarist empire until, with the help of interventionist forces, it (with the other Baltic states Latvia and Estonia) proclaimed its independence from the newly won Soviet power. I knew Vilnius as Vilna, Rokiskis as Rakeshik, Chavli as Shavill and, of course, Obelai as Obel.

In September 1981 Joe visited his village, a journey into his past of forty-five years

ago . . . The evening before departure I took a long walk through a nearby birch forest and tried systematically to collect my childhood memories of Obel. The winding pathway to our dilapidated wooden house. Beyond it, fields of mauve and yellow flowers leading to a river bank. Dark winter mornings and winter nights, through the snow with paraffin lamp in hand, trudging to and from the synagogue school. The sauna-type ritual public bath house (*mikva*) where we all went to bathe before the Friday synagogue service. The slope which marked the beginning of the village from the direction of Rakeshik. In the winter snow dozens of us uncontrollably sliding on a large, packed sledge. At the top of this slope the only double-storey building which was somehow connected with a relative who owned apple orchards whose pinkish-cream fruit was stored in the loft. The frozen lake on which we skated with sharpened bits of wood tied to our soles. The house in winter dominated by an outsize brick cooker (*pripachik*) which supplied the central heating and which warmed a brick ledge above it to provide a place into which the whole family crawled and slept during the cold nights. A few festive occasions such as weddings when crying was intermingled with the singing of the Yiddish celebratory song, 'Let us all together, together, drink a small glass of wine' — an endlessly repeated refrain. Snatches of our departure; a horse and cart to the railway siding at Rakeshik; a farewell present of a home-made toy-cart and the necklace of miniature bagels for the journey from the beard that was my grandfather. People came all the way from Dishat, about 20 kilometres away, to wish us Godspeed.

These, then, were the shadows which floated across my mind on that walk through the birch forest on the outskirts of Moscow. The next morning we boarded the early night sleeper to Vilnius . . . I had already decided that I did not want to enter the village in a convoy of official cars, or to be met with pomp and protocol by the village officials. I wanted to browse around unnoticed, to stare rather than to be stared at, to find landmarks which would lead me to our house, to the synagogue school, to the bath house, the river and the lake.

There it was: the top of the hill; the beginning of the sledge ride; the double-storey structure; and the familiar shape and forms returning to me of the main street descending steeply for some distance as far as the bridge of the narrow river and then flattening out into a winding road skirted by fields and pine forests. I was at once stirred by the distinctive smell of the apple trees which grew in abundance. I was to discover that day, for the first time, that indeed in translation the name of the village is Apple.

We strolled around the back paths chatting occasionally to old people (they all seemed to be women), trying to find someone who remembered the Slovo family and remembered us as children. The old ladies consulted the even older sisters, but we continued to draw a blank. 'The synagogue?' 'They burnt it to the ground.' 'The ritual bath house?' 'That also.' 'The people, are there any Jews?' 'Those that didn't run away were all slaughtered, even children.'

It was now twilight and we moved... to the village administrative building to end our visit with an address by the head village official. She emphasised the link, through me, of Obel with the world struggle against imperialism and racism. I was garlanded with a white linen tassel spun from local material. With a bouquet of flowers in my hand I moved towards the car in the presence of groups of watching villagers.

We sped to a workers' rest home on the lake's edge. A sumptuous feast was waiting for us. Several dishes evoked memories of long ago, especially the combination of hot boiled potatoes, fresh cucumbers, spring onions and salted herrings floating in a soup plate of rich sour cream. After an interminable number of toasts we all adjourned to the sauna where the cycle of enormous heat, cold pool and a reviving vodka seemed never-ending. There were moments in the sauna when, closing my eyes, I was back in that bath house in which a whole Jewish community gathered to cleanse themselves before the Friday evening synagogue service.

I felt enormously privileged to have had the opportunity of indulging myself with such a large dose of nostalgia. At the time one recollection puzzled me, and continues to do so. The village is dominated by a hundred-year-old Catholic church whose tall spires can be seen for many miles around the village. Why then was my memory completely blank on this feature? Was it the distaste and contempt for non-Jewish religious belief which wiped out this object from the mind's eye of my early youth? The ghetto Jew's anomalous response to religious persecution was tribal bigotry. As children we were terrified to walk past the Christian cemetery and to this day I remember the rhyming chant, '*Yoshke Pandre liekt in drerd, oisgepagered vi a ferd*', meaning 'Jesus Christ lies in the earth dead like a horse'. (In Yiddish different words are used to describe the death of human beings and animals, and the word '*gepagered*' refers to the death of an animal.) We, the chosen (for persecution?), were taught that we were superior to goyim and for boys the greatest taboo was the shikse — a non-Jewish girl. Those who married one of these creatures were for ever beyond the pale. Antipathy towards, and fear of, the ethnic 'enemy' instilled into us from childhood undoubtedly helped erase that Catholic spire from my memory.

Joe's father, Wulfus Slovo, left Lithuania when Joe was two years old . . . 'to find a place for us somewhere beyond the village ghetto in which we were trapped.' He first travelled to Argentina and was on the point of sending for his family when he, like millions of others became unemployed as a result of the recession. He travelled to South Africa. There he hawked fruit in the streets and when he had saved enough money for our fare, my mother, my elder sister Sonia and I joined him. He was a man I first remember seeing when I was ten.

When we arrived in South Africa we moved into the suburb of Doornfontein, which was the lowest rung of the Jewish residential ladder. Those upon whom fortune smiled trekked northwards via Hillbrow to

Yeoville, Bellevue and parts of Observatory. The great leap forward from lower to upper middle class was symbolised by Orange Grove and Highlands North.

Our first family house was a rambling, tin-roofed structure in Beit Street, Doornfontein, very much in the style of the houses portrayed in the photographs of Johannesburg during the early days of the Gold Rush. The house was soon to be demolished and replaced by the Apollo Cinema and Crystal Bakery and the delicatessen for whom my father later worked as a bread delivery man and my sister as a shop assistant.

Within a few weeks of our arrival in South Africa I was sent to the Jewish government school very close to the Doornfontein railway station. Most of the pupils came from East European immigrant homes but this did not save me from being targeted as the latest butt of the school wags. And who could blame them? My completely shaven scalp (as part of a de-lousing process) and my recent arrival from a region which they assumed was run by the Bolsheviks earned me the nickname of Bald Bolshie.

By the time my family had made the first journey north towards Bellevue I had become sufficiently assimilated not to feel like a freak at my new school, Observatory Junior . . . In Bellevue we lived in a semi-detached house at 26a Rockey Street immediately opposite our newly acquired fruit shop.

Joe's mother was the mainstay of the shop despite her almost immediate pregnancy. Reina was born and a few months later she became pregnant again. But this time, in 1938, when Joe was twelve years old, she would die in childbirth.

The period of ritual mourning began with a week of 'sitting *shiva*' during which one is obliged to use very low supports (in our case fruit boxes) when seated. Prayers were held daily at which I, as the senior male offspring, was obliged to recite kaddish, the prayer for the dead. Prayer sessions could not begin until a *minyon* had gathered. A *minyon* was constituted by a minimum of ten adult Jewish males. Some of those who came for the prayer sessions were complete strangers to me and I discovered later that they were part of a professional reserve of 'minyonites' who augmented their income by moving from one bereaved home to another.

Women did not count as part of the *minyon*. They could only get to the Lord through their menfolk. In the synagogue, they were segregated in the 'gods' from where they could observe the goings-on in the stalls. Sonia resented the fact that I was the one to say kaddish and, in the privacy of our shared bedroom, she defiantly chanted the prayer before going to sleep. I feared that terrible things would be visited upon her for this blasphemy.

Within a short time of my mother's death a third tragedy occurred. *(The first, in 1938, had been the death of Joe's dog which Joe blamed himself for as the dog was run over as he rushed out to greet him on his arrival home from school.)* The gentle, smiling delivery man Jonas (I assumed like all Africans I came across that he had no surname) was killed in a head-on collision. My father and sister were

upset when I informed them that I had begun to say kaddish on behalf of Jonas and wail at the daily prayer sessions which I was now obliged to attend at the local synagogue for a whole year following my mother's death.

Unlike Job, the blows visited on me during 1938 found me wanting and I didn't last the course. As the year dragged on I began to look for rationalisations to escape the burden of the daily service which dominated my life and it was at this point that my break with God began. By the time I stood on the *bima* of the Berea synagogue to chant my allotted bar mitzvah portion from the Bible, I had already begun to question whether He existed at all.

Without my mother's input the shop slid towards bankruptcy. Reina was sent to the Johannesburg Jewish orphanage where she remained until her late teens. Sonia, already a fourteen-year-old, left school and began her career as a shop assistant. My father went back to the uncertain occupation of selling fruit from various pavement sites.

The Rockey Street house was given up and we started our return journey to Doornfontein via Hillbrow. In Hillbrow we lived in a boarding house in Esselen Street run by a Mrs Leiserowitz. There I met my first live member of the South African Communist Party, a Dr Max Joffe, who was courting his future wife Socky, one of the Leiserowitz daughters. I remember listening to Max shocking the boarders (most of whom were voteless aliens) when he talked of votes for blacks and of his opposition to the 'imperialist' war. He planted the first seed of political interest in me.

Early adulthood: the Party, trade unionism and Yiddish boarding house culture

(Joe and his father then moved) to Mrs Sher's boarding house in Van Beek Street, Doornfontein. At Mrs Sher's boarding house my father and I shared a tiny attic room. When we moved to the Sher boarding house I was in the middle of the first year (standard six) of secondary school (Observatory Junior High) which was to be my last year of formal full-time studies... Surprisingly, I cannot pinpoint in my memory when I shed Yiddish as my sole language and adopted English. I enjoyed my school-days and was excited by the learning process from which, or so I thought, I was to be for ever cut off by my mother's death... My father gave up the losing battle of his attempt to support me. So I found work as a dispatch clerk at Sive Brothers and Karnovsky, almost invariably referred to by the predominantly Jewish staff as 'Syphilis Brothers and Ganovim' (crooks).

Mrs Sher's boarding house had many of the characteristics of a Shalom Aleichem East European shtetl. Yiddish was the official language, and even Bazaar, the African who helped serve at table, developed Jewish mannerisms and used Yiddish expressions. Apart from the occasional excursions to the left-inclined Jewish Workers Club (burnt to the ground by (fascist) Greyshirts

during the war) social life for the inhabitants was restricted to the double-storey house which was ringed by a large stoep.

My leaning towards left socialist politics was formed partly by the bizarre and paradoxical embrace of socialism shared by most of the immigrants who filled the boarding houses in which we lived. I say bizarre because they tended to combine a passionate devotion to the Soviet Union with a Zionism and vicious racism towards the majority of the South African population.

In Lithuania I had been a member of Habonim (builders), the Zionist scout organisation into which every Jewish child was conscripted. Most summer weekends we camped in the surrounding forests and, around camp fires, we listened to tales of Palestine and sang nationalist songs in Hebrew and Yiddish. It was while living in Mrs Sher's boarding house that I was influenced to join Hashomeyr Hatzair — a Zionist organisation which claimed to be Marxist. The leader of the Doornfontein branch was Itchke Skikne, a passionate follower of Trotsky, who regularly harangued us about the permanent revolution and the role of the Jewish proletariat in far-off Palestine. Never a word about all the black South African proletariat from whose exploitation we were all benefiting in one form or another. The combined inheritance of Zionism and boarding house armchair socialism (in terms of which a 'kaffir remains a kaffir'), and the absence of any relationship with blacks other than in master-servant form, made my transition to real radical politics a difficult one.

My first attempt to join the Communist Party was unsuccessful. I applied to become a member at a meeting at the City Hall steps chaired by Issy Wolfson. Issy smiled warmly, eyed my short trousers, and told me that I should perhaps wait a year or two. Eventually in 1942 I was made a probationary member... I threw myself into Party work with a great vigour in the certainty (which I still have) that the revolution was around the corner. It is this triumph of optimism of will over pessimism of intelligence that has always sustained me.

The main focus of my Party activities was at my workplace where I recruited quite a number of members (mainly black but also a few whites including Mannie Brown) and we formed a factory group... Within a year our workplace was almost one hundred per cent unionised and after negotiations under the Industrial Conciliation Act broke down, we embarked upon a legal strike in October 1942 which lasted for a few days and was completely successful. I had been earning four pounds a month, and under the new agreement my wages rose to the handsome sum of fourteen pounds a month!

For me personally even the financial success of the strike was short lived. I had been elected as the chief shop steward and I became the obvious target of the bosses. They were even more worried about my association with the African workers and the activities of our Party factory group. I was warned about this by one of the main directors, Sammy Sive. He was truly sad that 'a nice Jewish boy' like me, who was given the privilege of working for 'such a

nice Jewish firm' should behave in such an ungrateful fashion. He was aware, he said, that I spent all my spare time in 'the native lavatories writing newspapers about communism'. He maintained that 'at heart we are all communists' and if I wanted proof I should ask Michael Harmel, who, only two weeks before, had been given a donation of fifty guineas from his own pocket for 'medical aid for Russia'. 'So stop making trouble with the natives and leave us alone,' he said with his very thick East-European accent. Being a rather 'cheeky boy', I don't make things easier by pointing out to him that I belonged to a Party and not to an insurance company and that he must not think that his fifty guineas to medical aid for Russia was a premium which would ensure that Sive Brothers and Karnovsky would be untouched by the coming revolution. My torrent of pomp left him speechless. He just pointed a shaking finger towards the door and, as I moved towards it, I heard a deep sigh accompanied by that most expressive all-purpose Jewish lament, '*Oi Vay*'.

A World War Two journey: Italy and Palestine

At about the time of my second sacking the Party had taken a decision to encourage all able-bodied white members to join the South African army ... In line with Communist Parties everywhere, our Central Committee had changed its stance on the war after the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 ... I was allocated to the Signal Corps. After a few months of training in radio and telephone morse communication, we travelled by train to Durban from where we eventually embarked for Egypt. After a spell at the Hellwon Camp outside Cairo, we crossed the Mediterranean, landed at Bari in Italy and proceeded to the frontline just south of Florence.

During my trade union days I entertained the forlorn hope that my white fellow workers would learn in the course of fighting the boss that they should fight the system also. Now I found myself in an all-white army fighting fascism. It was an army riddled with racist attitudes; in Italy, most members of my unit would happily have forgotten Hitler and turned their weapons against an American black walking arm in arm with an Italian blonde. And experience taught me that this type of gut feeling was not just an Afrikaner syndrome; if anything the purse-lipped racism of the English gentlemen from Natal was more irreversible. The Jew was slightly less rabid but even he saw little connection between the Jewish ghettos in Europe and the black ones in South Africa.

The war was in its final stages. Apart from spectacular artillery bombardments from our side and some stray bombing by German aircraft on road convoys, I neither experienced nor witnessed any major war action. I never saw a dead or wounded body ... The signing of the Armistice found us just outside Turin. On that night, 8 May 1945, we all linked arms with the local peasants and workers. We moved from street to pub and back again,

exchanging flowers, laughing, weeping, singing, and talking about the beautiful future.

University studies and late forties politics

Although I did not feel like a conquering hero (my contribution to the war seemed less than significant) my army journey brought another major point of departure in my life. I applied for and, to my great surprise, was granted a five-year scholarship to study law... The few years that followed my admission to Witwatersrand University were perhaps the happiest of my life. The joy of the relaxed discovery of knowledge, the excitement of sharp but safe student politics and the finding of new friends. My lifelong friendship with Harold Wolpe began at university; a friendship with the rarest of qualities.

Outside the university, the immediate post-war period saw a spate of hectic radical political activity. *(Moreover)* in the early and middle forties, electoral politics were still of some importance in the life of the Party... The 1936 legislation also gave an elite group of black voters (who had been removed from the common roll) the right to elect three white members to represent the black population in a parliament of 150 MPs. One of these constituencies was represented by Sam Kahn who stood as a communist in 1948 and won by an impressive majority... Sam's performance as an MP provides an excellent example of the way in which critical participation can sometimes do more to expose the iniquity of an institution than a thousand boycotts. He was a brilliant parliamentarian with much cunning and shrewdness. As an orator he ran rings round most of his opponents. He was a thorn in the side of the most powerful of white institutions — the House of Assembly. His eventual removal was therefore inevitable. He was also a source of annoyance for the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, dominated by big business and claiming to guard the broader interests of the South African Jewish community, the third largest in the world. At the height of Sam's public activities he was requested to meet the Cape Town committee of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies. He agreed to meet them and heard that, 'Of course, we don't want to question your democratic right to choose to be a communist, etc, etc, but being both a prominent communist and Jew, and bearing in mind the anti-Semitic record of the government, should you not have regard for the interest of the large Jewish community which is potentially threatened by the fact that a Jew happens to be the most prominent communist?' But at this game they were no match for Sam.

He conceded that the link between communist and Jew was a traditional fascist ploy to encourage both anti-communism and anti-Semitism, but, he reasoned, the linkage between Jews and business was also exploited for anti-Semitic purposes and he was sitting in the presence of the business personalities whose names appeared in neon lights along a good stretch of Adderley Street.

'I'll tell you what, gentlemen,' he said, 'as a gesture of concern for the Jews, let's enter into a bargain; you give up your business and I'll then give up politics.'

When the axe fell on our Party, I was in the final year of my legal studies. The study of law appealed to me both as an exercise in deductive logic and as instrument for the assertion of social and political rights. A combination of my interest and an instinct for examination technique won me a degree with a distinction and the prize for the best student of the year . . . It was (also) during my final year that I met Nelson Mandela. We spent many hours arguing about the Party's tactic of supporting the call for a general strike in protest against the Suppression of Communism Act and the subsequent day of mourning — 26 June 1950 — which again led to clashes with the police.

The lawyer, the raconteur: 'Husk me to drive a tram'

My twelve years of legal practice proved to be useful and enjoyable. The unending variety of civil and criminal cases brought pathos, sometimes tragedy and, very often, high comedy.

[Once] Attorney Stein brought two brothers to my chambers, Abe and Julius Zwetzel Levine, who narrated the following tale of family woe. Their parents, Moses and Sarah Levine, had immigrated from Poland in the late twenties and fought an endless battle to make ends meet. But suddenly their ship came home. In the early thirties they had spent a few hundred pounds on some hectares of land outside Johannesburg and tried their hand at dairy farming. The land happened to be immediately adjacent to Moroka Township proclaimed in 1946 and, since their property had business rights, its value rose to scores of thousands.

When Mrs Levine died in the late forties she left her share of the estate to her two sons. But her husband (who had long engaged in a bitter feud against his sons) claimed that Mrs Levine had no assets to leave since the land and dairy business were always his exclusive property. Indeed, the property was registered in his name as sole owner and the dairy business bank account was also in his name. The couple had been married out of community of property which meant that there was no joint estate and that the property of each spouse was in law completely separate. If, however, we could prove that the acquisition of the land and running of the dairy business were at all times partnership ventures between Moses and Sarah, then half the assets would now go to the sons in terms of Sarah's will. Since there was obviously no explicit contract between the couple, our only hope was to ask the courts to infer from the conduct of Moses and Sarah that they were engaged in a partnership venture.

And this is where Peretz Gischen came in. He was Mrs Levine's brother and, in the family feud, was very much on the side of his nephews. His evidence was crucial since we had no other witness who knew the Levines

intimately and continuously throughout the relevant period. By the time I had my first interview with Peretz I already half knew what to expect. I had read the verbatim transcript of his statement which, with colourful flourishes of Doornfontein English, was little more than a venomous out-pouring against his brother-in-law Moses Levine:

> First of all I should like to say something which it may be irrelevant but you will see what a Peruvian Moses is. When Sarah and Moses married in Poland I sent them a present five pounds which I didn't had. So I get back a present from Moses of a book in Hebrew written on the front cover 'To my ever loving brother-in-law Peretz Gischen'. Very nice. He's not in South Africa one week when, you wouldn't believe this, he comes and vants his book back.
>
> I vanted to give him not the book but a punch on the nose, but my sister vanted peace and made me give the Peruvian the book back. Then Julius Zwetzel is born. Moses is in Kroonstad collecting money for the *moyshev zkeynin* [Jewish old age home, literally 'the sitting place of the elderly']. I send him a telegram saying Julius Zwetzel is born and I give him the date of the bris. Vot comes is not Moses but a telegram saying 'How's Sarah and the baby?' So I send him back a telegram saying 'Mind your own business', which it may not be right from my side but it shows you what a Peruvian he is.

The statement was packed with stories in a similar vein and painted a picture of Moses Levine as a mean, tyrannical and deceitful man. I had the greatest difficulty in convincing Peretz that stories about his brother-in-law's general character were not admissible under our rules of evidence and that he would have to restrict himself to the basic issue in the trial, which was whether their conduct over the years proved the existence of a partnership between Moses and Sarah. I told him, however, that counsel for the other side might well cross-examine him in order to establish that his dislike of Moses was so intense that he was prepared even to testify falsely against him. I advised him not to try to hide his dislike of Moses and if counsel for the other side became imprudent enough to press for reasons for his hostility, then he had every right to narrate his favourite uncomplimentary stories about Moses Levine. He was unconsoled by this possibility and could scarcely conceal his feeling that either the law was an ass or that his nephews had chosen one for their counsel.

When the date of the trial drew near I was filled with apprehension. Peretz, my only witness of substance, seemed destined to make a poor showing in the witness box. His English was inadequate, but he reacted angrily when I suggested that it would perhaps be better for him to give his evidence through a Yiddish interpreter. His frenzied bias against Moses Levine would surely reflect on his veracity when he came to narrate the cold facts that had to be proved. On top of it all, his appearance was most unprepossessing; a small

man with a transparent complexion, a scalp with dispersed tufts of fluffy ginger hair which reminded one of a Karoo landscape with a myriad freckles covering his face and hands. But, as it transpired, Peretz was to turn the tables on all of us.

My first surprise was that he stuck strictly to the relevant facts when I led him in evidence; the joint discussion between Moses and Sarah when they were about to purchase the land and Sarah's contribution to the purchase price from dressmaking earnings, the division of labour between them in running the dairy business with Sarah doing most of the milking and cheese-making, and Moses taking the products to the market. Sarah would always pay the wages of the few labourers with cash which was kept in a business account in Moses' name.

It was as yet difficult to gauge how the judge would take to Peretz. 'Boet' Neser, an ex-Transvaal cricketer, usually ran his courtroom with the coolness and finality of a test umpire. But instead of raising his finger to proclaim sudden death he raised his head in a gesture suggesting that, counsel having failed, he was now seeking guidance from a higher being. Peretz would come into full sail only under cross-examination and there was no way of telling how the polite, anglicised judge would receive the ebullient and colourful Yiddishisms of our star witness.

Then began the truly unequal battle between my colleague Marcus Mandel and Peretz Gischen, whose humour and monumental shrewdness were to take virtual command in the many hours of cross-examination that followed. The beginning was predictable.

'Mr Gischen, you don't like Moses Levine, do you?'

'Vell, my lord, I shouldn't say I'm exactly in love wid de man.'

It looks pretty promising, a hint of a smile on the judge's lips. Mandel is prepared to risk it all.

'Would you tell his lordship why, as you put it, you're not in love with my client?'

'I can tell him plenty but I von't. Mr Slovo told me that I von't be allowed to say so because it makes no difference to the law if Moses is rubbish.'

Gischen said this with feeling but without rancour.

Judge Neser: 'Gischen, in the first place it is for this court to decide what questions you are obliged to answer, and, in the second place, for reasons which I need not spell out, the law would not have permitted Mr Slovo to lead you in such evidence, whereas Mr Mandel, at his peril, is fully entitled to canvass the issue. Are you pressing the matter, Mr Mandel?'

Mandel refused the rescue offer and demanded an answer. It was the moment Gischen was waiting for. He clasped his hands behind his back, got as much as he could out of his five foot three inches, faced the judge with quiet relish, and proceeded to describe the Hebrew book episode, the failure of Moses to attend the circumcision ritual and numerous other punishing tales about Moses.

Finally, with a sideways glance at Mandel, he rounded off this part of his testimony with the words: 'Mr Mandel, you husked for character, you got character.' Uncharacteristically, the judge exploded into a burst of laughter; the first signal that Peretz might indeed turn out to be our winning card.

On the facts of the partnership it was extremely difficult to dent Peretz, and without exceeding the bounds of propriety he somehow invariably managed to infect Mandel's questions with a touch of ridicule. He had already described (in a manner which I feared at the time would be construed as a slice of positive thinking on behalf of his nephews) how Moses Levine had in fact admitted to him more than once that he and Sarah were '50/50 partners'. Peretz was asked to explain why then the licence and the bank account were in Moses' name only. 'I didn't have to ask him that. We both knew that Sarah died without a word of English. Mr Mandel, has anyone ever given you a cheque in Johannesburg written in Yiddish?'

But, above all, it was the way Peretz Gischen handled the questions relating to the cheeses which in the end frustrated Moses Levine's scheme to disinherit his sons.

'You've already told the court, Mr Gischen, that over a long period of time you observed Mrs Levine making the cheeses.'

'Exactly, my lord.'

'Can you tell the court how big were the cheeses that you used to see her make?'

Peretz, with a dismissive and incredulous tone: 'My lord, how big are the cheeses?' The judge told Peretz that this was indeed the question he was being asked. Peretz, as if talking to himself, once again repeated the question and after a pause said: 'My lord, did I measure them, did I weigh them? If you vant I should guess, 15 pounds, maybe 20 pounds. Do me something.'

A similar exchange took place on the number of cheeses that he used to observe Mrs Levine making at any given time. By now Judge Neser understood that Peretz's repetition of the question was not an evasion but rather constituted part of the answer. Eventually Peretz told the court that he was recalling events of more than twenty years ago, that only a crazy man would have gone around counting cheeses and ended up with, 'How many cheeses? If you vant I should guess then maybe thirty, maybe forty.'

The reason for Mandel's insistence that Peretz should give some idea of the weight and number of the cheeses which he saw Mrs Levine make became clearer at a later stage in the cross-examination.

'Mr Peretz, my client will not deny that from time to time you observed Mrs Levine making cheeses, but I want to put it to you that the cheeses which you saw Mrs Levine preparing were solely for domestic use.' Peretz once more rose to the occasion. With a broad grin on his face, he answered: 'So she made cheeses for domestic use? I don't know how big Mr Mandel's family is, but thirty to forty cheeses weighing 15 to 20 pounds, my lord, just work that out.'

It was earlier in the cross-examination, and still on the subject of cheeses, that Peretz gave an answer whose brilliance it would be difficult to surpass. He was still being tested on his claim that Mrs Levine's cheese-making activity was virtually a daily routine. 'You claim to have witnessed this process so often that, if you are telling the truth, Mr Gischen, you should be able to describe the process of cheese-making.' Without hesitation Peretz turned to the judge and said: 'My lord, how are cheeses made? For the last thirty years I have been catching a tram from Doornfontein and back almost every day. If you put a Bible in front of me I will put my one hand on the Bible and my other on my heart and swear, may God strike me dead, that the man was driving a tram. Husk me to drive a tram.'

When the court adjourned counsel had not completed Peretz's cross-examination. But by next morning negotiations began and an out of court settlement was reached in terms of which the two sons were to receive the value of their inheritance. In civil disputes the courts are very ready to encourage a settlement between the parties. But somehow one had the feeling that Judge Neser would have welcomed another session of light entertainment with Peretz Gischen.

Helena Dolny continues . . .

In 1963 Joe left South Africa for what he thought would be just a few weeks, but the Rivonia arrests changed that. Once in exile he never again practised as a lawyer. During a hiatus period whilst the ANC in exile organised itself, he did his Master's degree in law but in the end took the personal decision to work full-time for the ANC. Life in England was cosmopolitan. He and Ruth chose not to bring up their children with any exposure to the Jewish faith. When we were living in Maputo and Lusaka, although there were several comrades of Jewish origin in our ANC exile community (Joe, Ronnie Kasrils, Sue Rabkin, Albie Sachs, and I always think of Pallo Jordan as an honorary Jew-in-spirit! Perhaps like me he has imbibed the culture through his relationships), they are now all atheists, at least I think so. We never have any Friday night get-togethers, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur pass us by without notice and yet there is a tangible comfortableness that is rooted in a shared culture manifest in our pleasure in eating Sue's superb chopped liver.

It is on coming to Johannesburg in 1990 that we are marginally drawn into Jewish festivities through Joe's sister Reina, now known as Rene, and the very large Ephron family that she married into. We are occasionally invited on a Friday evening. It seems to me that many comrades I knew ignored religion whilst in exile but have been drawn back to their folds on return to their family networks. I wonder about Joe, will he be prepared to wear the

yamekah; no, and his atheism is too well acknowledged for an issue to be made of it in front of him. But his respectful silence during prayers and his having married a shikse means that we are more often invited for Sunday lunch! Joe's Yiddish background remained to be culturally expressed in the ease of certain friendships (especially Harold), in his food preferences, a certain musical nostalgia and his humour. His stock of Jewish jokes seemed endless:

> A government inspector arrives at a block of flats to see a Mr Rabinovitz. He looks at the lists of residents in the foyer and sees that the Rabinovitz flat is on the twelfth floor, flat number 3. He takes the lift, and knocks on the door. 'Does Mr Rabinovitz live here?' he asks the man who answers. 'No,' comes the answer. The official thinks perhaps he read the list wrongly and goes down to check. No, he was not mistaken. He returns to the twelfth floor. He again asks the man who opens the door of flat 3, 'Does Mr Rabinovitz live here?' The answer is again negative. He returns to the foyer to speak with the janitor. The janitor confirms that indeed Rabinovitz lives in flat number 3 on the twelfth floor. This time the official asks the man answering the door to flat 3, 'Are you Mr Rabinovitz?' 'Yes,' is the answer. 'Then why did you deny it when I asked if Mr Rabinovitz lives here?' Mr Rabinovitz waves a hand towards the interior of his apartment and says drily, 'You call this living?'

Joe enjoyed a nostalgia for Yiddish music. It was with great pleasure that he would listen to a tape of Doris Feidman. One evening, the guests at our dinner table are coincidently almost all Jewish, Audrey and Max Coleman, Nadine Gordimer. The topic of childhood exposure to music and its cultural influence is being discussed. I put on the Doris Feidman tape in the background. Everyone begins their reminiscence, but somehow again I feel Joe is more emotionally bound than the others.

When my younger child Kyla is a babe, Joe plays lullabies to her on his guitar, '*Tumbala, tumbala, tumbalalaika*'. She sits on the floor, solidly, in the nappy-anchor sitting style of her eight months, and listens enraptured. Some evenings, I remember this friendly bear of a man rocking her to sleep, softly singing the lullaby that his mother sang to him when he was a very small child, '*Rosinkes und Mandlen*' (Raisins and Almonds).

Joe translates the words to me and reflects on them as being every poor mother's dream, that the children will escape from poverty, as symbolised through the wish that the child will be able to afford to eat almonds and raisins, the delicacy of expensive nuts and dried fruit, rarely seen by a Jewish child growing up in Eastern Europe. 'My son the lawyer, my son the doctor, my son the businessman': the caricatured dreams of Jewish parents. Joe chortles as he translates the lyrics of the lullaby, '*Rosinkes und Mandlen*', wherein the poverty-stricken mother sees trading as a possible route out of poverty for her *yidele*, her little Jewish boy.

In some versions of the lullaby, a favourite being that sung by Dudu Fisher, the mother is a forlorn widow who 'sits in the synagogue in a very small corner . . . and the same lullaby she sings all the time, over and over again': 'And if one day you will be rich; You must remember this song; Raisins and Almonds; This will be your calling; little Jewish boy, you will be a good trader; Sleep, my little Jewish boy, sleep.' The music is gentle, soothing, almost haunting. As I listen to it again, whilst relatives translate the words I can no longer precisely remember, I am choked by my memories of Joe's tenderness.

I would say, on reflection, that Joe has passed on to Kyla a resonance with regard to Yiddish culture and Jewish religion. My elder daughter, Tessa, seems to be comfortable with the atheism/agnosticism of her parents and step-parents, but Kyla, not so. In 1992, she came home from school with a plaintive request that she wished to start going to church; that at Observatory Girls' School (which, curiously enough, occupies the premises of the Observatory Junior High that Joe attended more than half a century earlier) she feels that she is the only one who doesn't go to church. I say that I would really like her to have a sense and an appreciation of different religions. I suggest that she goes to the Anglican church with my devout colleague, Sheldon, that she can go to shul with Joe's sister's family and that perhaps we can talk to Farouk and ask if it's possible to go to mosque. And the next year she will be changing schools and be exposed to Catholicism at Sacred Heart. So the church trek begins. Within a few months, however, she has settled on shul as her preferred option, in spite of her shock at the way that the women sit upstairs separately from the men, at least in the shul attended by Joe's family. Somehow, while not having the rights that are passed on through matriarchy, my child finds her resonance in the synagogue.

In 1989, Joe and I travelled together to Lithuania for his second visit to his place of birth. I am a more than willing traveller; people's roots and their formative backgrounds interest me. I decide to keep a diary of these travels. We will once again travel with Alexei Makarov, Joe's best friend in Moscow. In Lithuania we will this time meet members of Joe's extended family whom he only met for half an hour on the previous occasion. Joe has two aunts, Sareta and Bela, several years older than him, who remember a great deal about his early childhood. Sareta has never married: 'This one was too this. This one was too that', so Bela will tell us later, 'and then after the war, there weren't so many men around'. Bela, now a widow, has two children, Juozas, a policeman, and Valentina, who teaches English in a secondary school. The family reunion takes place in the tiny bed-sitting-room flat of Sareta, the elder sister. The Sunday lunch reunion is especially noteworthy on two counts. Firstly, the inordinate care and effort that has gone into assembling this special, but relatively modest meal (at this time in Lithuania, even small food luxuries are difficult to come by), and secondly, for the turbulent political discussion. Lithuania is in the throes of nationalist debate and its quest for independence

from the Soviet Union. Juozas is a diehard communist, a loyal supporter of the Moscow line; his sister Valentina is a Sayudist, and a member of the independence movement. The discussion is passionate between the younger generation; the two older women are quietly withdrawn and reflective and Bela is saddened by the antagonism between the siblings.

The next day, Alexei, Joe and myself travel with Sareta and Bela to Obelai. We are met by Party officials, lauded with flowers, linen sashes and speeches. The exploration of the village covers the apple orchards, the lake, the spot where the synagogue used to be, the Catholic church.

Alexei and Joe stroll around the Catholic graveyard, the *verboten* territory of Joe's childhood. Sareta and Bela identify the house where Chaya (Joe's mother), Sonia (Joe's elder sister) and Jossel (Joe's name prior to arrival in South Africa) lived before their emigration to South Africa. Joe shows the rooms to me, the room rented out to house the Jewish library after his father's departure, the bedroom which he shared with his mother, the kitchen and the place where the *pripachik* stood. There's the kitchen garden and its cucumbers and tomatoes. The well is still in working order. We take photographs of Joe standing outside this green and ochre wooden house, photos of him hoisting the bucket out of the well. We drive outside the village to a memorial site which commemorates the thousands of Jews who were massacred in this district.

After the visit, Alexei returns to Moscow but Joe and I are to have a week's holiday at the seaside resort of Palanga; its healthy climate has attracted people to its sanatoriums since Victorian times. By pure coincidence, Bela is on holiday in Palanga at the same time. We agree to meet for coffee every afternoon. Joe and Bela can only communicate by speaking broken Yiddish, a language that neither of them has used for almost fifty years. The talks are necessarily slow as words are searched for, and even more slow as Joe then translates for me. In the evenings, when we are back in our rooms, I jot down what I remember of the day's conversation and piece together my understanding of the who's who in the family story.

Sareta and Bela are cousins of Joe's father, Wulfus; their fathers were brothers. There were three brothers, Davril, Dovid and Wolf. Davril never married but Wolf had seven children and Dovid had eight. The brothers fished together but the amount of fish decreased and the families were poor. Wulfus, son of Dovid and Joe's father, found employment with Isaac Sachs, a wealthy Jew, who ran a wood-cutting business. Sachs's niece, Chaya, lived with him and Wulfus asked for her hand in marriage; first Sonia and then Jossel were born. When Joe's father eventually emigrated, it was the uncle, Isaac Sachs, who took care of Chaya and her children until they left for South Africa several years later.

Bela recounts childhood memories. She remembers Joe's bris, 'He really shrieked on this occasion.' She says he was always a 'lively' boy. She recalls his clambering over his mother's shoulder and her catching him by the leg as he

almost fell out of the window on to the cucumber patch. She, of course, remembers him as 'the most beautiful boy in the village!' She also recalls his always running round with a stick, his teasing of his uncle's dog, his stealing Uncle Isaac's sledge so that all the kids could have a ride down the hill, his going to *cheyder* (the Jewish school) with a paraffin lamp in the winter months.

Bela herself was exceptionally bright at school. She went to Rokisckis to study and then to Kaunas. She was recruited by workers into the Young Communist League of the then underground Lithuanian party; the workers especially recruited young students to write pamphlets. When Lithuania became part of the Soviet Union, Bela was offered a scholarship to undertake cinema studies in Moscow. As the Germans entered the village of Obelai in August 1941, a brother thrusts his sister, Sareta, into the last place on an over-full truck that is leaving from the other end of the village. He pushes a piece of paper into her hand; Bela's address in Moscow is written on it. 'Go find your sister. I will start walking. See you.' She is not to know that she will never see him again.

Joe asks about other family members that he remembers: his grandfather, his great uncle Isaac. No one else survived. Bela reels off an endless list of her parents, brothers, sisters, cousins, nephews, nieces who were all killed.

Obelai, she says, has always been a small village. The land belonged mainly to German and Polish families. Ethnic Lithuanians actually did not own much land and mostly worked for kulak families. Those Lithuanians who did have land had up to twenty or thirty hectares but not more. The Jewish community was not allowed to own land, and very few, if any, sought agricultural employment. Life, she says, was difficult for Jews. They could not have land. They could have education easily but they could not get government jobs.

Juozas, Bela's son, unexpectedly arrives in Palanga with a detective chief inspector; they have been investigating the murder by car-bomb of a black marketeer in the nearby port of Klaipedas. Juozas can speak a considerable amount of English, and on Saturday we sit in Palanga's leafy botanical gardens and the conversation flows more freely.

'The Jews of Obelai were not actually killed by the Germans,' says Bela. 'People don't want to remember. The Germans always appealed to nationalist elements and there were Lithuanian nationalists (*unterhalten*) who actually did the killing for the Nazis.'

Bela tells of her return to the village with Sareta in October 1944. The massacre of the Lithuanian Jews took place in August 1941. She and Sareta make their journey back in October 1944. The two sisters arrive, each with a small suitcase and a handbag. What they wear and what they carry are the sum total of their worldly possessions. 'It was terrible, terrible,' says Bela, choking on her words and hardly able to continue speaking. The neighbours tell her, 'Your father Wolf Slovas was killed, your mother Rachel Abramovitch too, your sister Ida also.' 'And my brother, his wife, and their baby?' ask Bela and

Sareta, wanting to know, needing to know, yet hating the finality of the knowledge. 'Also.' One neighbour asks them to wait a few minutes and he goes off. He returns and passes a coat to her; it is Ida's coat. The Lithuanian from Obelai who shot Ida had taken her coat before shooting her and given it to his wife who has worn it for the last three winters. Bela says softly, 'They took everything before killing, the jewellery, the clothes, even the gold fillings from the teeth — before shooting. The children, they didn't bother to shoot — they just bayoneted them and threw them on the heap.' There is silence as Bela regains the composure to continue. 'But here was Ida's coat... Obel, it's such a small village, and people had so few clothes that you always knew whose coat was whose, what kind of jacket such and such a body wore. Everyone knew that this was Ida's coat that the woman wore.' The two sisters stood side by side, each with a little luggage and now the coat, the single family possession, that had been retrieved. 'Going back, it was a terrible experience... and then to stand there and think, "What to do now?"' These events are awful for Bela to tell. Juozas, Joe and I sit on the park benches, immobilised, our eyes brimming with tears. There is a long shared silence.

She and Sareta went to Vilnius. They got work in the government's Finance Department where Sareta then stayed for the rest of her working life. Bela won't tell us, because she's afraid to say it out loud (it's Juozas, her son, who tells us quietly), does not go to the Finance Department after all. Because she has been a member of the Party since the age of fifteen, she is asked to join the security services (the KGB) and becomes a lieutenant colonel. She works there for seven years until her daughter is born. She says those early days after the war were so difficult. She worked seventeen hours a day and sometimes didn't sleep, but they believed they were building a new society. 'We believed in so much; we made so many mistakes,' she states reflectively and with sadness in her voice.

I ask about her Jewishness and the children's upbringing. She says she married a Lithuanian who was not Jewish. Her children were not brought up as Jewish, did not learn prayers, did not learn Yiddish, and had a secular education. There had been so much pain to being Jewish. People didn't like Jews. 'Were there pogroms here in Lithuania?' I ask. 'No,' says Bela, 'but Jews always get the blame.'

We move on to share some lighter moments, to release ourselves from the heaviness of this conversation. Joe asks, 'Have you heard the joke about Stalin and Pushkin? Well, it was the anniversary of Pushkin's death. There was a sculpture competition for a memorial. Stalin was to decide on the winner. There were at least one hundred entries: Pushkin reading, Pushkin walking, Pushkin writing, Pushkin sitting. Guess which entry won the prize (pause)... the one of Stalin reading Pushkin!'...

Joe continues, 'Do you know the one about Stalin meeting Roosevelt during the war? Well, Stalin met Roosevelt and during the meeting Roosevelt mentions that he has heard that Jews in the Soviet Union have

problems. Stalin asks him to explain. Roosevelt says that he's heard that in such and such a place in such and such a district, there is a community of two hundred Jews and they do not have a rabbi. Stalin says, well he doesn't have the facts at hand and that on his return he will check this out.

'Stalin returns to Moscow. He sends for the party secretary of the district referred to by Roosevelt. He asks if it is true that there is such a Jewish community. The answer is yes. And that they have no rabbi? Again the answer is yes.

"Why not?" asks Stalin.

"Well," explains the district secretary, "there are three possible candidates. The first has been to Party school but hasn't been to the school for rabbis. The second has been to the school for rabbis but hasn't been to Party school. There is a third who has indeed been to the Party school and the school for rabbis."

"And so," asks Stalin, "Why isn't he appointed?"

"Comrade Stalin," says the district party secretary hesitantly, "but he's Jewish!"'

Another day we walk along the pier at Palanga on our way to yet another coffee house and more small cups of thick dark coffee or perhaps black tea served with the hardest sugar lumps that I've ever encountered. It's true, those stories of their grandmothers that I've heard from Jewish friends; it's possible to put your sugar lump in the front of your teeth and lips and drink your tea through it. You cannot do this in present-day Johannesburg; the South African sugar lumps, served with tea and raspberries in the Russian Tea House, crumble if you try to drink your tea through them. As I sit at the table on one of our last days in Palanga, I am dredging my mind, trying to remember the German words of my own childhood. Joe and Bela speak broken Yiddish; the similarity teases my memory tantalisingly. I want to frame my own phrases and questions. I stare at the cutlery on the table (*tish*) of the coffee house serving *Kafe* and *Kuchen*; knife-*messer*, spoon-*lepel*, I've forgotten the word for fork. 'What's the word for fork?' I ask Joe. '*Ein forfel*,' he replies and lists the names for cutlery. 'Aah,' sighs Bela, 'we've learned to eat nicely since those early days in Obel. Remember we never had knives, forks, spoons; we ate everything with one wooden spoon.'

Although a lot of our time during those ten days in Lithuania was spent with family and in a way completed Joe's earlier quest, the importance of the visit turned out to be one of the space it afforded for timely political reflection. On our train journey from Moscow to Vilnius, Makarov and Joe have talked through the night, accompanied by vodka, about 'the situation' in the Soviet Union. Makarov, ever the pessimist, and Joe, ever the optimist, locked into an inconclusive, animated discussion in which each consistently failed to convince the other. Our visit took place at a particular time of political flux. Stalin is being criticised. Debates rage in the newspaper; some consider it as not very useful to judge a historical period by the degree of cruelties inflicted but by the measure of progress and achievement. In the Lithuanian capital Joe

and I slip into a Catholic mass. The cathedral is packed out. It has only just been reopened as a place of worship, having been used as an art gallery for many years. It is again a lesson that the coercion of a people to relinquish a culture, a religion, only serves to reinforce resistance however repressed and dormant this may be for a period. Joe's aunt is herself very reflective on the political mistakes made over the half-century that she has been actively involved. In retrospect, I realise the trip was the catalyst to Joe's writing of his pamphlet 'Has Socialism Failed?' for he started to write this almost immediately after our return.

And so where are we in our appreciation of Joe's having been brought up Jewish and so rooted within Yiddish culture? The humour, the talent as a raconteur are undoubtedly present. The practice of Judaism as having provided a moral creed is questionable. In fact Joe seems to have gained some positive progressive insights in reaction to religious practice; he rejected the bigotry of the ghetto and was furthermore influenced by his sister's early rebellion against gender discrimination in the synagogue. From his interlude in Palestine and his eventual reflections on the Jews' quest for a country to call their own, he noted that freedom which is won through subjugation of others is an unworthy freedom.

I think this, amongst other experiences of African one-party states (wherein a majority subjugates a minority) clarified his thinking *vis-à-vis* the importance of a Government of National Unity here in South Africa. A 'winner takes all' perspective was undesirable; it would simply ensure a long-term problematic future. He also rejected Jewish political activism which was in and of itself Jewish; last year, in parliament, there was a proposal that parliamentarians of Jewish origin should meet as a group — Joe refused to participate. He was first and foremost a South African, a communist activist who, by the by, happened to be Jewish in origin. That doesn't mean that he denied his roots; and he certainly felt that his Jewish origin obliged him to respond positively to requests to speak made by the Jewish community. But he was very clear that while he respected his origins he was no longer a practising Jew. When people are on the point of death they often (re)turn to religion but Joe firmly stated that he wanted a secular funeral and to be buried in a secular graveyard; he did not want relatives to claim for him in death that which he had chosen to relinquish in life. I think if he had summed up what he gained from his origins, he might say: a childhood with a solid sense of belonging to a community, a rich oral culture, and the knowledge of what it is to be poor, to be discriminated against.

Others, notably Jeremy Cronin (another goy!), have recently reflected on Joe's Jewishness as an influence on Joe's life. In an obituary, Cronin writes, 'Slovo's . . . personality was deeply influenced by his secular Jewish roots, and the left East European Jewish émigré circles that were so important to the early Communist Party of South Africa. There was definitely something Jewish about Slovo's joke telling, for instance. It embodied a secular wisdom

that came from the shtetl, a humanism born of a lineage of suffering survived, not just heroically, but wryly, jokes that are told against oneself.'

In the *Weekly Mail* article published in the days after Joe's death and during the funeral preparations, Cronin attributes Joe as having 'humour, an alert mind, sociability and a shrewd sense of timing'. The article ends with this reflection: 'In the past days I have been serving on a Slovo funeral media sub-committee. One of our tasks has been to come up with apt and pithy slogans for the occasion. It is not easy to catch a life as full as Slovo's in a single line. Our best effort we had to reject because of its inability to work cross-culturally in our South African context.'

Their best effort read simply:

JOE SLOVO
1926-1995
MENSCH

GILL MARCUS

'You're not the universe . . . you're just you.'

Gill Marcus, the second of four children, was born in August 1949 to parents involved in the SACP. She started a BCom at Wits University but left the country in 1969. After twenty-one years in exile in London, where she worked for the ANC's information gathering department, Marcus was among the first returnees to South Africa in 1990. She helped set up structures for the newly legal ANC, functioned as spokesperson for its Department of Information, and was elected to the movement's National Executive Committee. After the April 1994 elections she became an MP, representing the Tsitsikamma area of Eastern Cape Province, and was elected chairperson of the Standing Committee on Finance in the National Assembly.

In April 1996 in a cabinet reshuffle in which Trevor Manuel became South Africa's first 'black' finance minister, Gill Marcus was appointed deputy finance minister.

Like several other of the 'political animals' in this book, she prefers presenting her life as an integral part of the life of the political structures she has been involved with. Thus milestones in the Struggle become her personal history, and her personal history becomes part of the history of the Struggle. As such, she is a challenging subject for an interviewer wishing to access a private life divorced from her political being. Marcus's style has always been to deflect attention away from herself, and towards the matter at hand.

Interviewed by Robert Berold
10 March 1995
Cape Town
and Immanuel Suttner
14 September 1995
Johannesburg

How did you get involved with the liberation movement?

My father was a member of the SA Communist Party. I grew up in an environment where I was very aware of justice and human dignity. The development of my father's politics was a process. He lived on a small farm, they were very poor, as most people in the *platteland* were in those days. Because he was the eldest boy, my father had to take responsibility for

things, like getting the milk to town before going to school. His own father was a religious Jew, a smous, who had rented a farm just outside Kroonstad. My grandfather died when my father was only three, and after his death they continued to live on the farm, moving to Kroonstad itself at the time of my dad's bar mitzvah. Kroonstad was a small, conservative, tightly knit community. My dad came to Jo'burg at the height of the depression, with no fixed ideas as to what future lay ahead of him, and battled. In retrospect, he acknowledges that he was completely apolitical for the first few years, but in the course of time he became aware that the world was somewhat different to the conception he had held as an impoverished youngster on a farm in the Orange Free State. He came across ideas as he met with people, and he was open to these ideas. I think it was the kind of people he came in contact with, including people who were outstanding figures in the Jewish community – Michael Harmel, Rusty Bernstein, Eli and Violet Weinberg. His brothers were also involved.

His political orientation came out of being part of the Jewish community?

It came about mainly through the turbulent events of the 1930s, mass unemployment and the rise of fascism in Europe. At the same time, the growing menace in South Africa of the Greyshirts and the Ossewa Brandwag undoubtedly made a strong impact on him. My understanding is that the people he knew from that era were primarily from the Jewish community, but it wasn't because the Jewish community as a whole was involved in the Struggle. The people who got him involved were all lifelong democrats.

So you grew up knowing that was the direction you were going?

I don't think these things are automatic, but I do think it was an enormous advantage that my parents were involved in the Communist Party in the forties, in Johannesburg, and therefore knew people like Mandela and Tambo and Dadoo. You grew up in a different atmosphere from many other whites. It gave me insight into issues in South Africa. Because even at a young age people knew in a sense that you were democratic, you were people who cared about people. And therefore a lot of things came your way – people among the African communities who in their daily lives were experiencing problems would come and discuss and say, we have this difficulty, can you help us? So there was definitely an awareness of the issues.

Left:
Gill Marcus (Photograph: Anna Zieminski)

I was quite precocious as a child. I was very interested in what had happened in Nazi Germany. I can remember reading books (which in retrospect I'm not sure that I understood at the time) about it at the age of nine or ten, while I was in primary school.

You equated Nazism and apartheid at that age?

I said: if that could happen there, what is different? That easy manner of meshing the two occurred partly because I was so young. If I had come across it later, perhaps I wouldn't have equated it in the same way.

When you met other Jewish kids at school who presumably didn't make that connection, how did you respond?

They didn't make the connection. By and large, even now, most Jews don't. They will resist the question.

Why is that?

I think it's a personal experience. I understand Jews saying we lost six million people, and how do you equate it? There's nothing to equate with such a loss. I agree with that. But to me what is equatable is a discrimination based on race. The solution that was found in Germany was the Final Solution. The solution that was found here was the dumping ground, the out-of-sight approach, reducing people to non-people, denying them dignity, denying them education, denying them the rights of life. I can understand Jews' sensitivity in saying don't equate it with us losing six million people. You didn't wipe out six million African South Africans. Well, you didn't in terms of gas chambers, but you did create an enormous death rate, and deprivation. So there is a difference, but the social engineering concept of it and the racial definition of it is the same.

Coming from your background, how did your attitudes differ from other white children at school, and later at university?

I was very conscious at school, and certainly the couple of years I was at university, of the enormous fear. People were terrified of the regime and what it meant, and did not want to know what was going on. And that inhibited them. It created, in my view, very superficial relationships. You didn't want people to know how you thought, just as much as they didn't want you to know how they felt. You didn't trust people. That was the one thing that one really felt in that period, the lack of trust.

I finished school in 1966, and looked around, and said what are the options for me? Like good Jewish parents, my parents said the one thing nobody can

ever take away is your education. So I thought, well, let's do something practical... so I went to do a BCom. I did my first two years, but quite frankly I was bored. I didn't feel it was the kind of thing I wanted to do. At university there was obviously a certain amount of student activism, but I was never interested in student politics. Because it was just that: student politics. I thought: if I'm going to go to jail I want to do it properly, not for nothing, if you want to put it that way. My elder sister was also at university, she did her BA in economics. The two of us decided that we wanted to go abroad, have some experience [of life in another place] which we could judge things here against. Then our parents said: 'Do you think we're staying behind — you've got to be kidding!' The mid-sixties was also a very difficult time politically. After the arrests and trials, it was quite depressing here. So we went abroad in 1969. I finished my BCom through Unisa, because I had to work. I started working for the ANC in 1970. Like everybody else, I just became a member at first, finding out about the organisation, its policies, its approaches. Then I began working in the organisation's information unit, and ended up being the deputy secretary of information, and the editor of a news bulletin for fifteen, sixteen years. It was a weekly news briefing, a 20-25 page journal on events in South Africa.

You were in London for a long time... twenty-one years. Were you solely involved with the ANC work, or...

No, in fact, when we got there, there was a lot of activity, like huge marches against the war in Vietnam. And I personally have an absolute passion for marches. I feel that they have a tremendous sense of people's values, people are actually willing to come out on the street, and stand up and say, this is what I believe in, and I'm going to let you know about it.

That whole period, early seventies, saw a lot of marches and meetings around Vietnam, freedom in Zimbabwe, the Solidad brothers and Free Angela Davis, which all linked into the anti-apartheid struggles. You also had your pickets at Greenham Common. That's just outside London, where Britain had nuclear bases, and it was essentially a women's picket against nuclear armament.

So one participated in activities which related to struggles world-wide. But the protests I remember most were the South African ones, outside South Africa House. That for me was the central issue. I remember particularly that when we were on anti-apartheid marches or pickets, the police were always very cordial. The non-South African one that I remember very clearly was the Falklands. Because when the Falklands war started, the national chauvinism that broke out was terrifying. It was in 1982. I remember I went with one or two other people who were from the ANC to the first marches that were called to protest about the Falklands war. There was a handful of people, and the police were furious with us for even daring to question your 'national

heritage' and whatever. It was quite interesting to compare their attitude to us as anti-apartheid protesters, and their attitude to us when we were protesting about the Falklands.

I remember it very clearly because at the start there was a tiny number of people, forty or fifty. Then a weekly march or gathering was organised, protesting the war. The interesting thing was that the final march against the war was [via] Downing Street to Trafalgar Square and it was absolutely packed. It gained momentum and people recognised the real issues. To me, it was the move in Britain from an initial response of sheer national chauvinism, to actually thinking about the implications of the war, and people coming out on the streets, and saying no, this is absolutely not on. It might be a war, but there's a lot of things going on here that are not correct.

Did you catch the last wave of the counter-culture? You arrived in 'swinging' London in '69, the late hippie era, Carnaby Street.

Ja, all of that was happening. You came out of a South Africa that was very contained and controlled, and you get to London where you've poetry readings on every corner, and music... we went to a lot of music. My elder sister and I were very interested in jazz, and London was in many ways a centre for jazz. There was always Ronnie Scott, and the Hammersmith Odeon. We went to quite a lot of big bands when they had them; we also went to see all the blues singers, and we saw Ella Fitzgerald and Nina Simone. It was fabulous to actually see people who we'd only heard on records.

Were you familiar with South African jazz before you left?

Not really. But you also got much more involved with it there, because you had a lot of musicians living in exile. There was Hugh Masekela, and there was Julian Bahula's band Jabula, and Dudu Pukwana, who died a little while ago... Abdullah Ibrahim. So, there was a whole lot of South African jazz, which was very stimulating.

What were you reading when you were abroad? Was it mainly black writing?

No, mixed. I think I read most of the writing that came out. Really whatever one could get... ECC literature, Black Sash publications, *Staffrider*... Wally Serote's *To Every Birth It's Blood*, and Nadine Gordimer and André Brink. Whatever one could get. There was also a period when the International Defence and Aid Fund republished books that were out of print, like Mary Benson's *Birthright to the People.*

Did you get tremendously homesick?

No, I don't think I ever got homesick in that sense. I'm far too practical a person to do that anyway. Remember, the work I was doing, my daily life, was about South Africa. The newspapers I read were about South Africa. That was my job, reading South African newspapers and magazines and journals, everything that was coming out of South Africa.

Mmm. So you had to just plough through thousands of miles of print all the time.

All the time. Now that I'm back here, I want to read from abroad. Because living in South Africa, it's very easy to shut off the rest of the world, and think you're actually the centre of it. I think that is part of what reading should be, to make you aware of other experiences.

In terms of people that you were mixing with in London, were there people who you moulded yourself on, either consciously or unconsciously . . . ?

I don't think I would look at it as 'moulded'. It's difficult to mention names, but certainly Yusuf Dadoo, who I knew well, and got to work with over a long period of time, influenced me. Also Oliver Tambo, who I thought was one of the most remarkable men of the century. I think that Tambo understood people, and he knew how to work with them, and was somebody who was absolutely [humble] in himself. He was only concerned with what was happening in SA, what was happening to people, and he was doing everything he could about that. He cared about the people in generic terms, but about the individual as well. He was an incredibly insightful person, politically and personally. Dadoo was also a very caring human being. I think a free SA is very much the poorer for not having had the benefit of his leadership. Again, very insightful and dedicated, certainly a person who had no perception of himself as a grand player in the larger scheme of things. Then people like Joe [Slovo] who I was friendly with for a long period of time. He was in England when I was first there. Then he went to Africa, but even during the periods of time there, because of the work that I was doing, which was information for the movement, I always had a lot of contact with him.

I've known Pallo Jordan for about twenty-five years, and I've actually worked closely with him for at least twenty years. He was the head of my department. I have great respect for Pallo. Pallo's power is a brilliant intellect, which, as a historian, he's used to look into a lot of issues. I value his opinion enormously. A very principled person.

Did you have excursions to Africa during that period?

I went there quite often, but I never stayed for a long period of time. I used to

go there for specific issues around work. So, I spent some time in Angola and Lusaka and Tanzania.

During the time that you lived in London, were there any people outside the ANC that you had contact with?

No. I think it was just the way you lived and what your daily preoccupations were about, and I don't think people outside the ANC were that engaged with our concerns. You met them and you knew them, but they weren't your close friends. That was certainly the case for me, perhaps for other people it was different. Initially, the South African community was composed of people who had known each other for a long time, people who came out in the early sixties and seventies. They were then joined by a much wider group of people who came in the late seventies and the eighties. I think it made for very interesting dynamics. It was a big community at that time, hundreds of people.

As it grew larger there must have been issues of trust. Who's genuine, who's not, spies.

Well, that obviously was always a factor that people had to bear in mind, given what went on there. The South African regime was very busy in London. They were always trying to find out what was going on, and as you know, they had hit squads, they bombed our office, all that kind of thing.

Were you present at that bombing?

It was my office. This was in the late seventies. I used to edit the ANC's weekly news briefing, and we'd normally finish it on the Sunday. This time we decided to finish late on the Saturday, because we were going to have a march on the Sunday. If we hadn't been going to have that march, we would have actually finished our work on the Sunday, and would have been there when the bomb went off. When the police phoned us to say there's a bomb, everybody thought, oh God, we're normally there. It was the first time in about five years that I wasn't in the office at that time. The bomb was outside the wall of my office, which was on the ground floor, and my office was completely destroyed, so we had to re-equip it totally.

But the biggest concern for me was that behind us was a school where the kids assembled at nine o'clock on a Sunday morning, and the bomb went off at about five or ten to nine. If it had been a little later, you would have had the place full of kids.

How did it impact on you personally, in terms of feeling this far from abstract

hatred directed at you?

Personally, I never got involved in responding in that way. My only response was, well where do you find a machine to put out a news briefing, because our briefing was supposed to come out the next day, and they weren't going to stop us. And that's what we did.

So that was your immediate response. Was there no fear later . . . sometimes people block stuff out initially. But afterwards, late at night . . . ?

Yes, of course you think that, but our main response was we're not going to lose a day out of this. Where are we going now? Different communities in England were very supportive. There were the churches, and there were women's groups, and the British Communist Parties (there were two in Britain at the time) and trade unions . . . all of them gave us support, they gave us office space, and they gave us assistance. We found a place where we could do our typesetting, a place where we could do our printing, and a place where we could do our reading. And for the next three or four months, we moved between other people's offices. Just drove around, so each day was at someone else's place, and it wasn't an issue, which we felt was a helluva achievement. By the way, there were quite a few attacks. It wasn't the only one. But it was probably the worst one.

Why did you stay committed despite threats and actual attacks on your life, and a lot of difficulties in general?

I don't know. The only thing that I would say is that one always felt very much South African, and I think that the people of South Africa are quite unique. I feel there's something tremendous here. I've always felt very moved by the culture, the people, and the integrity. It's not something abstract. Also seeing the way people responded and their commitment to each other. Whether people liked each other or not. A lot of people liked you, a lot of people didn't. It's normal in any society or community. The issue was not whether you liked me or you didn't like me, we were really there to try and tackle something else.

It sounds like a way of side-stepping the difficulties of relationships.

No, I don't think so, because there were obviously people who you were much closer to, and people who you distinctly avoided.

Who did you avoid?

[Laughter] The point is that even those that you did not interact with in a way that you would choose to be your friend, you certainly chose them as your

colleague. And that's a difference for me. Your friendship is the part that you choose. Your colleagues are the people that you work with. The working relationship is one of respect.

When you returned, did you maintain contact with people you'd formed bonds with in exile?

Not much, simply because of the pace of life. It comes from living in a country, rather than in different parts of London.

Do you see yourself, in terms of your work, as living in an entire country and not having any specific 'neighbourhood' loyalties . . .

[Laughter] No, I don't think so at all. But you see, it's a question of what happened since we came back. When the ANC was unbanned in 1990, I was asked by it to help set up structures in SA. There were three of us who were asked to come back from exile into the country, even before the Groote Schuur signing, but the South African government wouldn't let us in. We ended up coming in May. Just waiting for three months in Lusaka before they'd let us in. We were the first people coming in, the three of us, Joel Netshitenzhe, myself and Jeremy Cronin. He'd come back for the Party, and Joel and I were asked to come back for the ANC. Because we came back then, and tried to build a communications infrastructure for an organisation that had a lot of demands placed upon it, one just lost touch with other facets of life. For that first period, you did nothing else but try and set up those structures.

It's quite a big price to pay in a way. To lose out on those relationships.

Yes, I think it is a loss. What I have found though, is that my family and friends tend to be very patient, very understanding and supportive. I think that they accept that I'm there when I'm there, without too many conditions. I'm very lucky in that. I think that it's a very difficult kind of relationship to have with people. And it takes a lot of support and understanding from their side, and it's probably quite selfish on mine.

What about family?

I've got an older sister, a younger brother and a younger sister. My younger sister lectures at the University of Pietermaritzburg – sociology – and she does a lot of research there. My brother and elder sister were both in England, but my sister has decided to return to South Africa. My brother has been for a visit, but he's got young children, and he hasn't quite decided whether he wants to come back permanently. I hope he will.

In another interview you laughingly referred to yourself as a 'worker bee'.[1] You put in years of unacknowledged drudge work for the ANC.

I don't think it's me who has contributed to the ANC. I think the ANC has contributed to me. Anyway, you never did it for acknowledgement. Obviously it's always nice if someone says, well, that's a good job that you did there. Everyone likes and needs that kind of praise. But . . . you did it to see whether we could get to where we were going, and I think we've at least overcome one enormous hurdle, and that's an incredible achievement. Now the real problems start.

And you come to deal with those problems with the same basic principles, the same things that gave you strength all the years out in the cold?

I would hope so. The only difference is that I think as you get older, you need to recognise that you don't run the show, and you've got to make room, lots of room for young people with ideas, and with energy, so that you have this combination of new and old . . . in a new situation you encourage new talent to come to the fore.

For historical reasons, South Africans who've been in the movement came to be in it for a long time. Some of them have been around since almost the turn of the century. I think that's a unique situation, where people have sustained a lifetime of struggle, and outlived the system which oppressed them. A lot of effort went into us, when we came in as young people. That's why one can say who impacted on one, they gave of their time in a real sense. They were available. They would talk about issues, and they'd come to you when you did something wrong, and say, you know, why don't you think about this or that or the other. I think that maybe the new South African situation is so demanding that we're not taking enough time with the people coming up. And I think that's unfortunate. I'm not sure if there's a solution, but I would hope that as a person who's now older and more senior in the ANC, I also put time into the people I'm working with, in the same way that time was put into me. I don't think I have achieved that yet, in the way I would like to.

How did you move across to finance?

For the past twenty-five years I've been involved in communication and information. When I came back here and became an MP, I thought, well, maybe it's time to do something different. I also felt that the issues now were about delivery, and that the debate would move from the political arena to the

1 Interview by Todd Pitock, *Jewish Affairs*, Summer 1993.

Q: So you're one of the drones?

A: [Laughter] OK, if you want to put it that way. A worker bee.

economic arena. So I thought, let me see what I can do on the finance committee. And I was elected chair.

How does one go about translating the values of the ANC into budgets and economic mechanisms?

Well, that's what one is really trying to do. There are a number of aspects. How is the money spent, is it in fact addressing people's needs? Is it going towards building a better life? Obviously one will never do it totally, but can we find a way of creating a culture that is not so avaricious and individually self-seeking?

We're not serving five million, plus a million here and another two million there depending on colour, with the rest outside the field of vision. We now have to take into account forty-five million instead of just five million. So the problem becomes how to use resources when even the infrastructural development is not there. It's a tough battle — there's a serious level of deprivation and an over-utilisation of what little there previously was. I don't think anyone has really appreciated how enormous the dearth is. Government is overwhelmed by the amount that it has to do. Everything needs to be done simultaneously. That's the problem, really, which is why one needs a much wider base involvement, where government takes on the role of facilitator, and the doing comes from people's initiative.

Everyone has to be inspired to do it, though.

Sure. Well, that's our job, isn't it?

I'm amazed at how optimistic you are.

[Laughs] Why? I'm always optimistic.

And people's expectations — the poor, I mean?

Well, I am always hearing that people have completely unrealistic expectations. I don't think they have. What makes it difficult is the numbers, not the individual expectation.

Individual expectations are to have your kid go to school, to be able to get health care when you require it, to be able to have a roof over your head. People are not asking for a Houghton mansion, they're asking for a roof over their heads, with running water, with sewerage. Those are very basic necessities in any society. They're not unrealistic and, in my view, the approach that's being taken does make it achievable and affordable.

How do you see the future of the South African Jewish community?

It's a very small community, and I think one can understand its emphasis on inward-looking self-preservation. People often say, aren't African people anti-Semitic? That's crazy. Something came up at Joe Slovo's funeral, which I found expressed it very well. It was said that 'When we were all working, Joe Slovo came and everybody listened and they said fine, the Jew has spoken.' Joe Slovo may or may not have seen himself as Jewish in that sense, but the people out there saw him as Jewish. They've identified that many whites who have been involved, and engaged, and who have sacrificed in life and death matters were Jewish. So there is an enormous amount of respect for Jews. The Jews have a very high standing, in African communities generally, because of the role that individuals have played. And they have been seen not only as whites, but as Jewish.

In relation to that, the Jewish community as a whole needs to wake up to its responsibilities and obligations. They have got the benefit of what people like Ruth First stood for; in fact, as far back as the twenties you've got Jews who were involved. There's been an opening and an acceptance and a route for the Jewish community to travel. I would hope the Jewish community opens up to that, and recognises that it doesn't only have to look to Israel for security.

You're saying you want people to be South Africans first, and not Muslim or Zulu or Jewish first, but there's always this choice in terms of trade-offs — why trade a 'richer' identity for a 'poorer' one? I imagine a lot of Jewish people would say that on the one hand there's this hundred-year-old South African identity, and on the other, whether it's a fiction or not, this idea of a three-thousand-year-old identity . . .

Four or five thousand . . .

OK, whatever, but most South African Jews arrived a hundred years ago from Lithuania, and some of them have chosen to identify and become fully part of things here, but others say why should I exchange that very rich and ancient identity for such a new and unformed identity? Especially when one day I might be excluded from it anyway.

What I'm saying is that I don't think you have to exchange the one identity for the other, they're not a contradiction in terms. I think that the history, tradition and culture that you're bringing with you contributes towards SA. It brings in values, it brings introspection, it brings in the whole question of tradition and roots that come from elsewhere, and that feeds into the emerging South African culture. I would hope that people can recognise that the culture you bring actually contributes to the South African identity.

But isn't it a question of which narrative you're becoming part of? Some people are happy to become part of that unfolding South African story, and others will say no, that's not the collective narrative I want to be part of. I want to be part of the specifically Zulu narrative, or the Afrikaner one, or whatever.

That's their choice. If you're taking, for example, Jews, or Portuguese, as people who came from elsewhere, some of them might still see themselves after a few generations as not necessarily belonging. That's different from many other South Africans, who are indigenous South Africans. They come from here, and don't see themselves going anywhere else.

I think the reason why many South Africans who are descendants of immigrants (and we've got a lot of immigrant populations), tended to see themselves as still tied to their home country, was because they never actually interacted with the broader South Africa, the South Africa outside of their own sort of ethnicity. Normally, if you went to a different country, you didn't sit there as a sort of knob at the end of a stick, you actually got involved in the country, you lived there. But coming to a South Africa already run on ethnic particularist lines, the richness of the cultures was not something that was open to white South Africans. Instead of a natural coming together, it took the individual seeking to engage to discover what was out there. Whites have lost out in the past, they've been at a tremendous disadvantage because they've lived in this cocoon, while there's a great, vibrant and wonderful society out there, with a lot of values that are tremendously enriching.

To me, it's inspiring to be part of a broad South African culture. That doesn't mean you lose your Jewishness at all, or the heritage of the culture you come from — you bring it into the [broader] community.[2]

You're in committee meetings from early till late. Don't you overdo it?

People are [still] living terrible lives in this country. I do feel that in the past year and a half, or more, you've actually begun to have a sense of being that's different from what you had before, but for people who have been elected into positions by people who are counting on you, I don't think that you can be complacent.

Ja, but you acknowledge that you're not God, that you can't be there for everyone.

Oh, absolutely. I mean, I wouldn't think of myself in that way. I do feel it will steady out as you get infrastructures and institutions in place. That's what we've been doing for the past year. But you have a responsibility in the sense that if people do need to talk to you, you try to be available. Obviously you're not available to everybody; there are limits. Perhaps my concern is that because you're an elected officer, and you're sitting in Cape Town in

2 This last sentence comes from Todd Pitock's interview.

parliament, you think that's where the centre of the universe is. To stop that happening, you've actually got to make an effort, you've got to say, what are my obligations outside?

So, it certainly wouldn't be running around like a chicken without a head, but I do feel that the effectiveness of being in parliament is [predicated] on interacting with the community that you're working with, and ensuring that you are as available to them as you are to parliament. It is a very demanding combination.

Do you have any beliefs about people that they are fundamentally such and such?

I think you get good people, and you get people who are quite manipulative or evil. I think that you do get evil people.

In the sense of original sin, or people who've just been socialised in such a way that they've become irredeemably evil?

I'm not sure. I think there are evil people, and I'm not sure whether they're socialised into being evil. I think obviously the socialisation plays a role, but I'm not sure to what extent. [Anyway] I think that there are . . . some people who have no conscience in that sense.

I'm asking you about your beliefs in terms of a pessimistic 'Animal Farm' type scenario: there's this period of transition, a period of tremendous flowering and creativity; then Snowball gets chased out and Napoleon comes in and you end up with a dictator. Maybe we'll have that kind of scenario here, people not having the same moral integrity as the original leaders . . .

You need to create a societal norm, or community norm, that reinforces the right to take positions that are not necessarily popular. I don't think it's automatic that you move into the situation you describe, but I do think that it does require a constant vigilance, if you like, on the part of the individual and society. I wouldn't look at it pessimistically. I've always found that you do have people who will represent what, if you like, are morally correct positions, in the sense of higher values [transcending] political correctness, values that you have to make choices around. We were always under the impression that you do have people like that, and I think if you want democracy, it's essential to have them. The key is a flourishing civil society, debate, and the right to differ without incitement to violence or racial hatred.

As a woman, did you ever encounter a form of disguised patriarchialism in the ANC which you fought against, feeling it had no place in a movement like that . . .

I wouldn't put it simply in the ANC. I think South Africa is a very

chauvinistic society, a very male-oriented society, and I think that cuts across the colour line completely. I think that one is very conscious of being a woman in a man's world. It doesn't matter how many of you there are – it's very much a male world. And I think it's an issue one has to keep to the forefront. But not in an artificial manner. I'm not happy with an approach that says we have Joe and Harry and another male in that position, so put a woman in, anyone will do. I find that kind of tokenism objectionable. Because I think just as you look at the quality of a person when there's a man that you want to put into a particular committee to tackle something, you also look at the quality of the person when it's a woman being considered. So that attitude has to be overcome.

The issue is really about interpersonal relations [regardless of gender]. All of us have strengths and weaknesses, and in our activities with each other we can either play on the weaknesses or play on the strengths. Where you play on the strength you actually build people. It's a force at work, we find that all of us grow in that process . . .

There's not only male chauvinism. You'll have women who do not build women, and if anything simply play the male role in the relations of domination with other women. I would say it's not simply a chauvinism, it's a style of behaviour . . . a lot of women who 'make it' start having the same sort of relations with other women that male chauvinists have had.

Were there times when your authority was questioned because of your femaleness?

I would say that there's definitely an underlying chauvinism. It's a factor, but if I look at how it's affected me personally, it's more difficult to be specific. I've always found people very respectful towards me in that sense of encouraging a viewpoint, of wanting to hear what you have to say.

Not that I'm saying I have authority, because I wouldn't look at myself as having organisational authority. Authority derives from the way you conduct yourself, what you bring to the debate, rather than a formal authority which only derives from your position.

Were there strong women you admired?

Not individuals in that sense. I'd not looked to individuals and thought, Oh I'd like to be like that. I think it's events which influenced me more. I'd say 'I don't agree with that', or 'I agree with that'. I would say what influenced me the most was, in fact, reading about the Holocaust when I was young, and also things that dealt with racism, with issues of the Black South, or with working-class issues around conditions of miners. Not documentary books, but novels. I remember a book about the Chicago meat-packers, I think it was called *The Jungle*. I'm sure I didn't understand a quarter of it, but it impacted on me.

The Holocaust seems to be a seminal event for most of the people in this book, and they all responded to it by saying we must universalise the fight against racism, whereas I'd say the majority of world Jewry reacted to the Holocaust with increasing separatism, with 'We must look after ourselves because the lesson of the Holocaust is that no one else will.'

Yes, but I don't think that they are mutually exclusive. I totally understand that feeling of 'If we don't look after ourselves who will'. I remember reading a book, written by a guy called Steiner.[3]

He asked in his opening to the book, how did it happen, and he portrays this image of rows of people standing in the snow just going along passively to their death, and to me that image was the answer to how it happened – because we let it, the world let it. And therefore I understand totally the question of defending yourself. But part of the defence of yourself is ensuring that racism is not tolerated, whoever it is aimed at. If you don't want it to happen to you, you've also got to not let it happen to somebody else. I made that equation very early. If you want to protect Jews in this country, you also have to ensure that there isn't a racism that pervades the society. Because, just as you dehumanise one group, you can dehumanise any group.

If you look at it today, we've got these bombings in Bosnia or Herzegovina, but you'll have a Muslim response to it, rather than a South African response. You're responding to it as a Muslim, whereas in my view, something like Bosnia needs every person to be out there protesting, it's not about whether you're doing something to a Muslim person.

So you don't think a separatist, ethnic response to human rights abuses is enough . . .

Well, it obviously touches people ethnically in a sense that if you're receiving the kind of treatment that the Muslims in Bosnia have had, it's obviously going to spark a response. However, I think there's a responsibility of non-Muslims to say, this is not the kind of world that we can accept, we cannot accept atrocities of this kind . . . it actually requires a universal condemnation.

I would like to reach a point in this society where we are conscious of these issues, and we have the ability to say, this is what we're going to do about it. It shouldn't be something around a religious chauvinism. Not that I'm saying that the Muslim response was simply an act of chauvinism, but I think that South African society . . . the democracy that we're trying to build . . . would be much stronger if, when something like this is happening, the South African community, both people and government, would not wait for a Muslim response, but would actually do something about it as South Africans.

3 See Pauline Podbrey's interview (p 59), where she recalls arguing with Steiner.

world. It's not a different persona. Being private just gives me the opportunity to do some of the things that you don't otherwise have the opportunity to do. But it's not a switch.

So you are whatever you are all the time.

As far as I'm aware, yes. And people who know me recognise that. I'll always say exactly what I think, or at least most of the time. My recollection of myself is that, from a very young age, I was always absolutely clear about what I was in relation to myself. I mean, I can remember at four, five, six being quite clear about what I would or wouldn't do. I think I was actually very quiet, believe it or not. I was quiet, but you couldn't get me to do something that I didn't want to do.

Do you have friends across the ideological divide?

Certainly. People's friends are not necessarily ANC. But I don't think I would be able to be friendly with someone who did not have basic common values. I would have difficulty if you really saw the world very differently around human values and ethics. I would certainly be unable to be friendly with someone who was racist. That wouldn't be something that would interest me at all.

Are your parents still sympathetic to the SACP, or actively involved?

They're not members of the SACP any longer. Certainly they've been long-standing members of the ANC. My father still works for the ANC full time.

Did you go through a period of disillusionment with the collapse of Eastern European socialism?

I think everybody who was involved, whether you were a member of the party or not, experienced that. I think anybody who thought about the question of the different opportunities for humanity, had to be disillusioned. It's almost like this giant hoax perpetrated against people who went along with it quite genuinely; so yes, of course it impacted on people like my parents, especially coming from that era.

But it hasn't shaken that vision of a better alternative.

No, I don't think so. Of saying that there are other values that society should have. The debate is just around how you achieve them, and what kind of norms and values one is creating in society. What one has to do is prevent abuse, and certainly in that sense people have taken a second look at the

options. But the issue is that society must care about its people, otherwise what kind of society is it?

So, the bottom line of this humanistic, democratic socialism hasn't shifted for you or your parents. There's a guy in this book, Jack Flior, from the Jewish Workers Club in Doornfontein. He went to fight as part of the International Brigade in Spain. Now he's old and bitter, and says the Jewish God failed me, and the Marxist God failed me as well. He says he should have been a scientist and studied mosquitoes rather than wasting his life on politics.

If he hadn't found the cure for malaria, would he also have been disillusioned? No one ever gets it perfectly right, and certainly not governments. I think it's sad that he feels that way. I don't think it helps to talk in terms of 'wasting your life' — you have to do what's right, and a lot of people have lost their lives in doing what they think was right.

Why do you have to do what's right?

Well, when I say that, it's not a question of looking at which God failed you. You're not doing it because you want to serve the God of Marxism or a God of this one or the other. You need to do it, because that's your conviction, it's the kind of value system you want to be committed to. You're not the universe, you're just you. It wasn't a possibility for me to sit back and do nothing. You make choices at critical junctures in your life, according to the necessities of the time. How could anyone question a choice such as fighting fascism in Spain, and how could anyone be ashamed of having made such a choice?

I think he means the guiding ideology failed him. Not so much God him/herself.

If you're choosing to do something you've got to do it because that's what you're convinced is what you want to do. He's saying it was wasted time. If you were doing it because you were convinced that was what needed to be done, then I don't think it was a waste of time.

You may not succeed, and it may fail. You need to look at it and say, were you being true to yourself in doing it? And even though you knew it would fail, would you do it again? If you were true to yourself, you would do it again. That's the issue, because otherwise you're in a situation where you just do what's expedient.

Have you ever felt a need for days like Rosh Hashanah and Paysach, or Christmas and Easter — days whch delineate a yearly cycle?

No, but I think that was again because you weren't in a community where

those days were being observed. I've never related to Christmas as a religious day at all. All we said was thank God there was a day off.

When you've had to deal with rites of passage, people being born, people being buried, which ones have you used?

I haven't had the occasion to. If you asked me how I would deal with such events I would say yes, I certainly want it to be dealt with in a Jewish fashion. But I've not had to do that.

Your own funeral?

I would want it to be a combination, because I think that my whole life has not been tied specifically to the Jewish community. But I think that certainly it's part of my culture and tradition. So I would need it to be a combination.

Do you get angry when the Jewish community climbs in and claims people back that it rejected earlier? Like at Joe Slovo's funeral where a whole lot of long-lost cousins suddenly turn up and want to take pride of place on the stage?

No, I don't. I actually think that it's a measure to which the Jewish community has moved in its thinking. I think it says that these are the kind of values we now want to identify with, and I wouldn't think it's something that we should reject, and say well you didn't before. I think that it reflects a mood change that is very good.

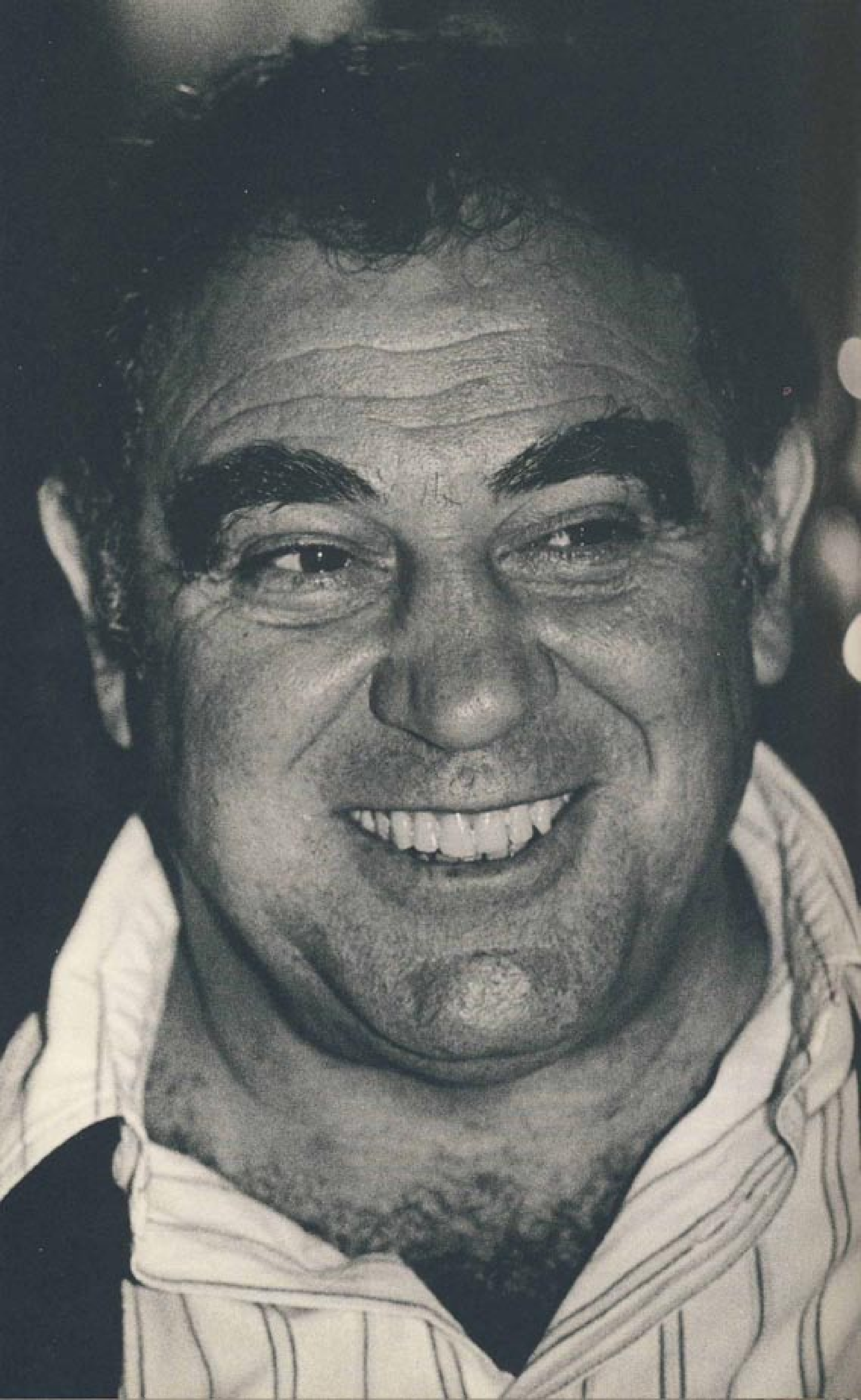
In terms of your Jewishness, is there anything that you observe, for example, holidays?

Well, obviously on a high holiday like Rosh Hashanah, it's the new year, it's nice to be with the family. I think my life style has changed, and I think coming back to South Africa there's been more interaction with the Jewish community. The South African Jewish community is a tight-knit community, and I've found interacting with it very interesting. I've learned a lot from the interaction. While I'm not religious, I'm certainly very conscious and proud of being Jewish. Perhaps there is more of an awareness now of the traditions and rituals. But for me, the essence of my Jewishness is in trying to live a life that has value.

How do you define that value?[4]

You make a contribution to others. That to me is a life of value.

4 From Pitock's interview. See footnote 1, p 255.



RONNIE KASRILS

'The pressure points of history provide people with
the possibilities of showing what they are really made of...'

Born on 15 November 1938, Ronnie Kasrils grew up in Yeoville, a lower middle-class suburb of Johannesburg. Educated at King Edward VII School (KES), he matriculated into a South Africa moving rapidly towards grand apartheid. After dropping out of law, he worked as a script writer for a film company. The social circle towards which he gravitated consisted of bohemians, people who ignored the racial divide as much because to do so bolstered their non-conformism as because of any conscious political agenda. The Sharpeville massacre had a major impact on the young Kasrils, accelerating his politicisation, and in 1961 he joined the South African Communist Party. He left South Africa in 1963, in order to avoid incarceration, after having participated in several sabotage operations. The 'Yeoville boykie' who had been bar mitzvahed at the old Yeoville shul went on to become a central figure in the Party, and functioned as head of military intelligence for the ANC's military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe. He operated a small army of 'moles' who provided vital information about the plans and capabilities of the South African Defence Force. All in all, Kasrils spent twenty-seven years in exile, operating from London, Lusaka and Luanda, and spending long periods in the ANC's Angolan training camps. Operation Vula — intended to get ANC leadership back inside the country to link up with the mass democratic movement — brought him back to South Africa at the beginning of 1990. He worked underground — constantly evading the security police — until June 1991, when he received indemnity.

There is a certain Byronic aura about Kasrils, whose very real commitment and contribution manage, without being cheapened, to come across as a sustained romantic gesture. A natural flamboyance has done nothing to diminish this. His willingness to take risks with his own and other people's lives earned him sobriquets of 'hotheaded' and 'impulsive' (amongst the kinder ones) but he has emerged unscathed into his current role as South Africa's deputy minister of Defence.

In exile Kasrils wrote and published poetry, and co-authored two books on English philosopher Bertrand Russell. He has also written an autobiography,

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Left:
Ronnie Kasrils (Photograph: Ellen Elmendorp)

Armed and Dangerous. He is married to Eleanor, and they have three adult children.

Interviewed by Harriet Gavshon and Immanuel Suttner
July and December 1995
Johannesburg

The Long Drop

Look down
from a headlong height
into a long drop
and know how Babla died.

The long drop
a helpless fall
they said he jumped.

'That one?
He left by the window,'
they casually boast
grinning into pain.

A man does not fall
like stone
there is blinding light
at the centre of an explosion

Transfixed
the murderers stand
above the abyss.

A N C Kumalo

'The Long Drop' (taken from the collection *Poets to the People*, edited by Barry Feinberg, Heinemann, 1980) was written in 1970 and is about Babla Saloojee, one of the first detainees to 'fall' to their deaths from the seventh floor of the special branch offices in Johannesburg. A N C Kumalo was the *nom de guerre* of Ronnie Kasrils.

HG: A central premise of this book is that although organised Jewry was largely silent during the apartheid years, there is a preponderance of Jewish individuals who were involved in the struggle against apartheid. Would you say that was correct?

Proportionate to other white ethnic communities, yes. Certainly when I first became involved in 1960. I think that had changed somewhat when I returned from exile in 1990. Perhaps because the Jewish community had become comparatively more conservative along with the rest of the white population. Yet one still found a healthy sprinkling of individuals of Jewish origin in the anti-apartheid arena in our country, in the trade unions, the alternative media, the Five Freedoms Forum — many of them close to the ANC. From World War Two through the advent of apartheid in 1948 and the subsequent years of struggle, a significant handful of Jewish individuals (often married couples and their offspring) stuck their necks out and joined the liberation struggle. Most had connections with the Communist Party but they also differed from most white liberals in that they were prepared to break the apartheid laws. By so doing, and sharing the risks with black and brown freedom fighters, they won the admiration of the oppressed majority. But they were an extremely small percentage of the Jewish community who, when things got rough, virtually disowned them as troublemakers, not so much because they were communists but because they sided with black liberation. They were a brave and dedicated band of people, of strong will and character, of humorous and optimistic spirit, who made an impact in diametrical proportion to their small number.

Among them were the redoubtable Ray Alexander, the almost legendary Joe Slovo and Ruth First, Solly Sachs and his son Albie, Eli and Violet Weinberg (who knew my own parents), Sonia and Brian Bunting, Rica Hodgson (married to my mentor in sabotage, Jack), and Esther and Hymie Barsel (with whom my grandparents once lodged in Yeoville).

Also Rusty and Hilda Bernstein (born Schwartz, she took the party name of Hilda Watts), Denis Goldberg, Jackie and Rowley Arenstein, who were my first contacts with the movement (Jackie is my mother's first cousin), Vera Ponnen (née Alberts), who hailed from London's East End, and married George Ponnen, an Indian trade unionist. Apart from Albie Sachs, they were all from a much older generation than mine. I was fortunate to know everyone I've mentioned. All were members of the Communist Party at one time or another. Every one an atheist, none maintaining a Jewish identity, and regarding themselves as South Africans first and foremost. (Perhaps Rowley is an exception, because he has embraced a Zulu ethnic cause.)

Why do you think there were so many Jews in the South African Communist Party?

I think there are two key factors — one was the wave of immigration from

Eastern Europe, working-class Jews with socialist ideas, in the 1920s, in the wake of the October Revolution. These were Jews of humble origins from shtetls and so on. And that wave left an indelible mark on the Party and its role in the twenties and thirties. The other key factor was the war. A new generation had to deal with the impact of the war. The struggle against fascism, both internationally and inside this country clearly made a major impact on the Jewish community here. Jews were very involved in the Anti-Fascist League. Because of the role of the Soviet Union and the Red Army in the war, the Friends of the Soviet Union was extremely popular, and the Communist Party in SA gained many white and Jewish recruits.

I became involved in 1960, at a point when white involvement with the ANC/Communist Party alliance had become negligible because of the intimidation in the fifties. The Sharpeville massacre was a great shock to me, but only a handful of younger whites of my generation became involved in the immediate post-Sharpeville period. In fact no more than a couple of dozen youngsters nation-wide, including Eleanor Logan whom I later married.

Maybe half a dozen were Jewish, one of whom I recruited. That was Ivan Strasburg who married Hilda Bernstein's daughter Toni. During exile I recruited and trained many whites, of whom Sue and David Rabkin and Raymond Suttner were Jews. Dr Johnny Fluxman, who did great work in the camps, and Barry Gilder, who now works in military intelligence, also got involved at that time.

My perception is that in the period between the end of the Second World War and now, the Jewish community has been upwardly mobile, and clearly moved into the ranks of the middle and upper middle class, which has reduced their identification with socialist thought and involvement in struggle. Unfortunately it also affects a basic humanistic ethos. For me, the meaning and impact of my Jewishness emerges from the humanist ethic of Judaism, the appeal to justice and tolerance, and the Holocaust. I believe the upward mobility of the Jewish community has affected the type of individuals which the community has fashioned; much more business inclined, rather harder in that sense, but interestingly enough always a possibility of getting through, because of the heritage.

I always regarded my being Jewish with its history of oppression as meaning that I had a special responsibility to other people, but not everybody interprets it that way.

And you were shocked when you discovered that they didn't. It shocked me when I was younger and, up to a few years ago, it still did. Maybe I'm becoming a little more cynical now but, really, I loathe cynics and cynicism. I always took the injunction of loving one's fellow human beings as oneself to heart. South Africa made me see that injunction specifically in terms of applying it across race, colour and creed. Although I'm far from saint-like or from achieving that level of morality. Who is, anyway? But I think it's an

important part of being a decent human being, or striving to be one. I am positive about people, their life force.

This is the Judaism in me – the belief that human life has tremendous value, that human beings can soar to the clouds irrespective of the barbarity that they can sink to. I've found that in life.

You have said that when you met the Five Freedoms Forum and Jews for Social Justice in Lusaka you were pleased and quite surprised that there were still Jews in the democratic movement in South Africa. Had you thought that there weren't from the outside?

Yes. Firstly, the attitude in the early sixties was quite insular. And then, living outside, meeting South African relatives and friends in London, I'd seen this hardening of attitudes and insularity. The exclusive aspects of Jewish identity were being emphasised, with very little internationalism, and that's where the humanistic aspect seems to have been much corroded. These were general impressions. I hadn't read very much about emergent people of Jewish origin in the Struggle, and obviously there was such a long, dark tunnel of distance from the situation at home that it wasn't surprising. In terms of the work I was doing, military intelligence, you know, and political underground work, in the sixties, seventies and eighties, I had met and trained people like David Rabkin and Raymond Suttner (both Jews) but the handful of whites were not only Jewish. There were Greek South Africans, Lebanese, Catholics, Anglicans . . . this had not been the case when I was a young activist in South Africa. So meeting up with the Five Freedoms Forum and finding a good percentage was from the Jewish community was encouraging and I was pleased that they were there.

There were people like Franz Auerbach, connected with the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, the Chief Rabbi's wife Ann Harris, and at the other extreme people like Lisa Seftel, a young Jewish activist who impressed me, a non-believer, whose activism was in the broader community.

Returning home, and thankfully once again getting to understand South Africa as a resident, one sees a number of Jews are involved in intellectual, political, media, and professional life in a very positive humanistic way. I don't want to use political labels. So that humanistic strand of Jewish identity is still there, is still vibrant.

This despite the fact that the Jewish population has shrunk to less than a hundred thousand – ninety thousand I think, whereas in my day, relative to the total number of whites, it was proportionally double that. It says a tremendous amount about the deep roots of the Jewish community in this country that the involvement is still there.

I know that when my political consciousness emerged in the seventies it was very difficult to marry an identity with the left and a strong Jewish identity. I think if the

Jewish community had been more identified with anti-apartheid activity, it would have been easier. Did you ever feel that?

No, I didn't. I can appreciate what you're saying, but it was never an issue for me. Having become a member of the Communist Party, the Congress of Democrats and MK when I did [in the] 1960 period, the question of having to distance oneself from being Jewish just never arose. I did not find myself in a situation where I had to prove that I had now moved from a Jewish origin to embrace an Africanist culture, and this might have been the case in your university period when black consciousness had become an issue. For me, it wasn't the case — but I do stress that I'm talking about a relatively small number of people. The Congress of Democrats in Durban, where I became secretary, had about twenty members, and perhaps about fifty passive supporters in the white community; Johannesburg's Congress of Democrats membership was probably about eighty active and a couple of hundred in all; Cape Town's maybe something like fifty, with possibly twenty or thirty active. Most were the older generation whites from the 1940s. So one wasn't talking about very big numbers, and therefore perhaps one didn't feel the kind of pressures you're talking about. And bear in mind most were lapsed Jews.

By the way, in the Communist Party, the Jewish aspect arose because of one's quest for the history of the Party. You had all these wonderful stories about the generation of the twenties and thirties, memorable individuals who had come from Eastern Europe. Rowley Arenstein and Joe Slovo loved talking about those characters.

That's something I know can't ever leave you — language, food, sense of humour . . .

I absolutely regret not having learned Yiddish because I had an ear and an affinity for it as a youngster. It's something that I really regret because it's so expressive. What language has invented better terms than *ganste macher*, *shlemiel*, and *ganif*? In exile in Luanda or Lusaka I missed Yiddish food, the delicatessen repertoire of chopped liver, pickled cucumber, gefilte fish with *chrane* [horseradish], and my mother's potato latkes. But, lo and behold, travelling to the Soviet Union for the first time, I discovered these delicacies on Russian tables.

Yiddish humour is quite delightful. My maternal grandfather, Abe Cohen, was a great exponent. A plump jolly man with silky white hair, he acquired the nickname of *Kepkele* because of his manner of triumphantly tapping his *kep* [head] when he collected his winnings at cards or at the races. So was Joe Slovo. So is Pallo Jordan, a special friend of mine, who was married to a New York Jew.

Joe had an endless repertoire of jokes, of which his Yiddish anecdotes were the best. Even in such unlikely localities as Angolan bush camps he would delight Pallo and myself with his latest Yiddishism. He loved Solomon

Buirski's put-down of the Trotskyist Fanny Klennerman, who was a member of a nudist colony. Once she demanded a 'true' report from the communist office-bearer Buirski at a public meeting.

Slovo would mimic Buirski: 'I suppose you are looking for de naked trut, Fenny'.[1] Then there was Buirski's explanation for Hilda Bernstein's unexpected victory as party candidate in a Hillbrow municipal election: 'A konklomeration ov koincidences kulminating in a flook.'

You've had an extraordinary life, you've had a very exciting life. Did you have time to reflect on Jewish issues?

Not very much, although I'm basically quite a reflective person. When, as a kid, I reflected on the pain and suffering around me, and heard from relatives about the Holocaust and Nazi barbarism, it affected me strongly. But going into high school I became very active in sport and that sort of consumed me as politics did later — the practical aspect of politics — so the reflective aspects of myself haven't dominated very much. I regret that because I think if I'd had that time I probably would have been a little more intellectual in my reading and writing. At times I tire of an exclusively political diet, because I actually like to relate to people at various levels of life and philosophical outlook. In more recent years, meeting a lot of Israelis visiting this country, and figures like Rabbi Harris or Franz Auerbach, I've been exposed more to Jewish culture. I tend to be given books by various visitors from Israel and it's been quite interesting looking into the philosophical development of Judaism. Through these interactions I've been reminded of my early upbringing — you know, when I went to *cheyder* and where there were discussions with one's bar mitzvah teacher, or the odd frum uncle. The aspects of Judaism which had always somehow struck a chord with me have been what I broadly term the humanistic aspect, the messages of the Prophets, having concern for human beings, for your neighbour, sanctity of life, as opposed to the tribal aspects of 'smite your enemy' and so on. A visitor from Israel, a writer and diplomat, Arie Luba Eliav gave me a book of his called *New Spirit and New Times*, which is a quotation from the prophet Ezekiel, who is preaching to his people who have strayed from the path, and who talks about the need to adapt to new circumstances. He says, find yourselves a new heart and a new spirit if you wish to survive. When I read this it struck me as being so apposite for our times — here in South Africa for white people or, for that matter, for Israelis and Palestinians, or Bosnia, Rwanda, or Ireland. I've always liked to quote that, so I do find a relevance in Judaic culture. The Prophets tend to be filled with that kind of message, which is quite a contrast to the war-like nature of other parts of the Old Testament. Not that I'm putting that side down. I believe in the right of self-defence, of a people's right to survive. I've been a

1 For more anecdotes about Solomon Buirski, Fanny Klennerman, and other Communist Party activists of the 1930s, see Rowley Arenstein's interview (pp 371-402).

soldier from 1961, I'm a deputy minister of Defence, the biblical stories of David and Gideon and Samson have always appealed to me.

I totally reject the 'chosen people' idea, but obviously people are created by their history, by their inheritance, by their culture. So there is something about being Scottish or being Japanese or being Jewish. But for me it's not the belief in a deity or the religious code. I don't follow that code as such. But I know plenty of people who have always felt this very strong Jewish identity, without being at all religious.

We used to discuss what being Jewish was; is it necessarily the religion which most Jews tend to claim it is? I feel it is a heritage which one has, and I can identify with that heritage. I'm reading a book about Shalom Aleichem at the moment, and about my ancestors who I figure might have come from the shtetl of Kasrielefka he describes there.

IS: Oh, really the same village?

I'm not sure if the village actually existed, or if it is only a creation of the author. I like to think my name proves it actually existed. My paternal grandfather came to South Africa in the 1870s to prospect on the Kimberley diamond fields. He was the tenth male Jew in Durban, and made the *minyan*. His name was Nathan Kasrils. I have this image of the young Yiddish immigrant from Lithuania being asked in a strange language what his name is, and he thinks they're asking him where he was born so he answers 'Kasrielefka' and the immigration official takes the usual short-cut and simplifies the spelling. So I'm a Kasriel which, according to Shalom Aleichem, means a happy pauper, a jolly pauper.

Now Nathan Kasrils and my father Issy were rather restrained and circumspect, but my maternal grandfather, who hailed from Riga in Latvia, was a real carefree, merry extrovert. The quintessential Kasriel, although he was really a Cohen, Abe Cohen. He claimed his family name was Zaga Khan, and that it had been debased by the immigration officials when he arrived in South Africa at the turn of the century. We used to laugh at his 'extravagant claim' and yet just the other day a wealthy and prominent American Zaga Khan family contacted my mother and her brother Solly Cohen. It seems the Zaga Khans are attempting to update the family tree.

HG: In a way you embody an Israeli image of the Jew as 'man of action' rather than the Eastern European images of the Jew as victim or intellectual . . .

The Maccabi spirit . . . that has always appealed to me . . . although I have also been a poet in my life. But that's the thing about people of action, you find both qualities in one individual. If you look at David he has both — he is both David the poet, writer of psalms and the player of the lyre, a very soft David, and then, by contrast, the warrior, the warrior king. I have an affinity for that

sort of human complexity. I do have that soft side, and although I have lived much of my life as a warrior, I don't believe I compare to the image of the hard-as-nails Sabra. Did Moshe Dayan have a soft side like David? One sensed it in Rabin, when it came to the necessity of shaking hands with Arafat. And doesn't Arafat show the same dual quality? Where you have a soldier who's unthinking and unmoved by the death and destruction of war, then you've got the mercenary, then you've got the barbarian. In history there are many soldiers who actually have been writers and poets. I am essentially a person who loves peace, but sometimes defence to protect life is necessary.

I came to understand that as a very young kid during the Second World War, and afterwards with Israel's 1948 War of Independence. I was ten, and I'm actually quite amazed to remember how I read *The Star* religiously every single evening, searching for every bit of information concerning the War of Independence. Somebody criticised this book that I've written [his autobiography *Armed and Dangerous*] where I've recounted that, as a very young boy, I asked my mother, talking about the Nazis — why are they behaving that way to Jewish people and she gave me some explanation about anti-Semitism, and I had drawn a parallel with South Africa and said but we are behaving in the same way to black people here. And my mother, who was a very naive, warm lovely person, still is, aged 87, agreed with me. You know, with some astonishment I read a review of my book, which questioned how a kid of that age could have that kind of attitude. It hadn't occurred to me for a moment that someone would doubt the capability of a seven-year-old to make an observation of that kind. So this awareness, the empathy for human beings, lived with me from a very early stage. I've often reflected on my mother agreeing with my childhood observation, that whites treated blacks badly. My friends must surely have made similar remarks to their parents, but the answer would have been 'Blacks are used to living that way'. My mother's humanity created no such obstruction in my mind. I'm so grateful for that.

Can we just go back to Israel. You were saying how closely you identified with the '48 War of Independence. At what point did you become disillusioned with Israel?

Much later, but it wasn't a question of breaking off a romance, it was more a question of the romance having subsided. When I was twelve, going on thirteen, and Israel had survived [the War of Independence] I was most thankful for that.

I had my bar mitzvah, but found religion rather meaningless. I went on to high school and became a South African. My focus was very much on South Africa, although my high school period was one of sporting involvement and achievement. Second to that was an unease about the colour bar and the suffering in this country. By the time I matriculated, my concerns revolved around my own identity as a South African, and the kind of career I was going

to seek. The latter took me into the creative field, having tried law and dropped out. I became very interested in film, got involved in film writing, and showed a lot of promise. But the kind of life I was leading was one in which I was crossing the colour-line and having to try to resolve my own identity. In that was a very definite decision that to live in South Africa meant living outside the existing confines of this country and its laws, and in doing that I began to find my identity as an individual. I was now independent, young, romantic and film-orientated. I felt amazingly free, having discovered an alternative life style and culture. It was what South Africa was all about. Then the real shock-force of Sharpeville came along. It stunned me and opened my eyes and I looked at the friends I was involved with, who were all bohemian types right across the colour-line, interesting creative people, philosophers, musicians, poets, who existed in a perpetual cloud of dagga smoke and between multiracial jols. One was always ducking and diving from the police in terms of one's relationships. That Sharpeville hammer-blow made me walk around for weeks arguing with everyone about needing to do something and that is what then compelled me towards the Communist Party/ANC. The Communist Party was the first door I could find because of my background. I had a cousin in Durban, Jackie Arenstein, who had been in the Communist Party and in the treason trial. I took off in my Easter holidays and shot down to Durban to make contact, which I did, and I write about that in the book. That was an immediate entrée, people within the movement could trust me because I was known through my cousin. I was in at the deep end and that was it for the rest of my life.

So that young boy, his eyes focused on Israel's battle to survive, emerged as a young man fully involved in the Struggle here. That was a golden age, it had something which is unobtainable now. It was dangerous, but like in the heat of a frontline battle, you knew who you could trust, and the circumstances allowed us to accept each other in a very [profound] way. It was a period where one could forge the most wonderful everlasting friendships, because you were all being tested together. This is where one is fortunate to have been involved in the Struggle in that particular period. People can go through life never having the opportunity, the circumstances, of being able to fully prove themselves.

You had very stark choices you could make because of the time and circumstances you were in, but what does one do now if one wants to live a life of meaning?

You see, it's much more difficult in periods of peace because there are fewer clear choices. I think a key thing in human relations is establishing what are the others' bona fides, what are their motives, as a prelude to accepting them. Life's complexity is such that it is very difficult to ascertain that in a brief way with any other human being. It is the pressure points of history that provide people with the possibilities of showing what they are really made of. For

example, the greatest art has crystallised out of societies in conflict.

But we have to come to terms with the complexity of life in its more humdrum and drawn-out periods. I'm finding this a challenge now with government — it's such a long haul, it requires courage to be involved, a different kind of commitment to sustain that involvement.

The challenge is there and I believe one's just got to understand oneself and try and be very sure about the decisions and commitment one makes. It means that one's got to try to wrestle all the time with what one can do to make society and the world a better place for all . . . you see, I'm already grasping for the words and this is where one goes back to basics. For me, either you're just a crass hedonist or else you make a meaning out of creation, out of doing things that help other people. Very inadequate answer, but this is where one needs to be a poet or an artist.

Do you regret having missed out on a career as a 'creative' person, although I know you wrote poetry?

Protest poetry! [Laughs] A little bit. I like films so much that I would have loved to have been able to produce a film. I worked in commercials. Film is such an incredible way of getting ideas across. I have a feeling for film and a way of visualising and imagining. My brain works in a very visual way, in terms of images. I can remember films from ages and ages ago. You switch on a television set featuring an old film and it can be anywhere in that film and I'll tell you what happens next.

You and Eleanor [Kasrils's wife] were separated for fourteen years. It's a long time.

Eleanor: Fourteen horrible years.
Ronnie: And that's why we are now never apart if we can help it.

Your parents were never socialists. Did they understand you?

They had no basis to understand me. They understood me after the fact, or after the act, but my father died quite soon after my involvement began. So much was telescoped into the three years between '60 and '63 when we [Ronnie and Eleanor] were both involved. It always seemed to us like a lifetime. We used to say to each other — did that all happen in three and a half years?

My father died in 1963, but in the period that I was active here and had been banned and then confined to Durban magisterial district, I had a chance to talk to him and explain what it was all about. He became very supportive and actually quite proud of the stand I had taken. My mother is just a very sweet person. Whatever I do in life, she has supported me.

Years after my father's death I met, for the first time, Eli Weinberg. This was in London, a short while after Eli was released from prison. 'Your father Issy was a socialist,' Eli told me, much to my surprise. It turns out that my father, who was a commercial traveller, a salesman for Crispettes Candy, was also a member of Eli's trade union, which had many Jewish members. 'Your father was a good union member,' explained Eli. 'He gave me consistent support.' This was in contrast to the impatience and vacillation of many of the other members. During my school holidays I used to travel with my father on his rounds. Many of his customers were Chinese and Indian shopkeepers and I was proud of the mutual respect between him and them.

Were they isolated as a result of your activities, you were so notorious . . . ?

No, it didn't really affect them because they were living in a totally different world. My father died soon after I left. I was not well known, except in one's own circles. And then my mother remarried and her name was changed. From 1972 she lived with my sister in Britain. And when they came back here, the name change had given her that protection. So they never had any problems. Whereas Eleanor's parents, who ran a bookshop in Durban, were harassed to some degree. The special branch were constantly checking on them about our latest movements abroad.

A very moving part of your book was when you wrote about when your father died and you went to the Israeli embassy to say kaddish.

I arrived in Dar es Salaam in about October, and my father died in December, so I was recently from home. I got the news, and I felt I had to go and do the sort of thing that had always been impressed on one from as long as you could remember . . . that when your parents die, the son says kaddish.

[To Eleanor] You probably remember that, I said to you, I've got to go and say this prayer.

I really felt that I couldn't rest unless I went and . . . did something, and the people at the embassy were very kind to me. The guy helped me read kaddish because I hadn't really read Hebrew since my bar mitzvah, and was already losing the ability to read it. I stumbled a little bit, but I [more or less managed]. You know how impressive it is when you go to the synagogue and these guys just go brrrrrrt through the whole thing.

IS: Are you saddened by the fact that most Jews involved on the left have, to all intents and purposes, moved into a different cultural modality? Helena Dolny, in Joe Slovo's autobiography, describes Joe's last days, and there is New Year and a Christmas tree. Judaism is a memory, but the living rhythms are from Christianity (albeit secularised, but still derived from Christianity). Easter and Christmas instead of Paysach and Rosh Hashanah. People, including yourself, gave their

children names like Nicholas and Matthew and Andrew and Mary (rather than Rachel or Yael or Baruch or Eli). Your generation inherited Judaism whether you liked it or not . . . your children will have to seek it out if they want it. Shawn Slovo, in her interview, talks about her anger at never having been exposed to Judaism, about the lack of ritual and mystery in secular life, how sometimes she wishes she were a Catholic so that she would have that . . . aren't you saddened that your children won't know or care to say kaddish for you?

I married out of the faith so it's not an issue for them, 'cos they're not Jewish.[2] My wife and I have brought them up to be free thinkers. You can't lay down the law for your offspring and Eleanor and I avoided any pressure on them to believe as we did. Obviously they were exposed to the ANC/Communist Party milieu. The one thing I made sure of was that they should abhor racism and treat all people with dignity. My older son Andrew joined the ANC and Umkhonto we Sizwe and is presently with the Department of Foreign Affairs. My stepdaughter Brigid, who works in the field of health economics, also joined the ANC. My younger son Christopher is a journalist in England working on a socialist newspaper. We're extremely proud of them.

My sister was startled when we named our son Christopher, but Jesus of Nazareth, Christ 'the anointed one', was a Jewish prophet (at last the Oxford dictionary has got it right). I view him as a revolutionary of his time in the Jewish struggle against Roman imperialism.

The Judaism I learned at Hebrew school was taught with no relevance to the life around me in South Africa. Even for my parents' generation it had only a shallow ritualistic hold. For me the Talmud is arcane and esoteric. Once I was attracted to the liberation struggle, its rhythms and celebratory events took over. I never denied my Jewish origin, however, and I have enjoyed celebrating Paysach at the Chief Rabbi's home. He mischievously presented me with a red yamekah. I've used it a few times. I am also looking forward to visiting Israel at some stage. I have no identity problem.

One of the interesting things about this country is the way Judaism and Zionism became completely identified as the same thing. You don't find that anywhere else, not even in Israel. Do you think that has contributed to a growing sense of anti-Semitism over the years? The fact that some Israeli governments supported Pretoria, and that if the [Jewish] community itself could never make the distinction between Zionism and Judaism, how could anyone else do so?

That connection has obviously been tremendously limiting for individual Jews and their ability to show full identification as Jews. I think that those Jews who have made the passage from having both minds and hearts squarely in a Jewish exclusivity, from having strong emotional connections with

2 This is not necessarily so. See the footnote on p 204.

Zionism that you could never rationally challenge – those who have managed to cross that Rubicon tend to be people who show more of an affinity with South African culture and identification. But it's only a small percentage of the Jewish community who've realised that they don't have to be blind devotees of Israel.

In the couple of years since being back in South Africa I've met a number of Israelis [whose] Jewishness doesn't depend on a world Zionist cause or on a religion. It's been a wonderful experience for me meeting Israelis like the current ambassador,[3] who was opposed to the Six Day War. When I heard his stance it actually reinforced my own beliefs and outlook. I was criticised in Britain by relatives, and also by a section of Jewish students at the London School of Economics [where Kasrils studied sociology] because I protested against the Six Day War, and against Israel retaining the territory after the Six Day War. So meeting the ambassador, a guy who broke with the Labour Party because of the Six Day War's after-effects, I found myself with a kindred spirit.

I think one could make the point that the Jewish community here is very lucky that a few key players in the liberation struggle were Jewish. Do you get that feeling?

Ya, one saw this already back in 1960 (when my name didn't mean anything) there were so many people... ANC and trade union leadership and membership. These Jews were regarded as heroes, they were regarded as fellow members of the alliance and as communists, but everybody also identified them with being Jewish and certainly it rubbed off, and this phenomenon has continued to this day.

The Jewish community has lionised these individuals to some extent now that it is kosher to do so, but in the past many of them were condemned as people who were bringing notoriety to the community. And don't think that hostility is a thing of the past. Not long before the national democratic election [April 1994] I was invited to the Linksfield synagogue in the company of Rabbi Bennie Isaacson, who was to address the congregation. A few bigoted souls couldn't bear his powerful anti-apartheid message and accosted us afterwards, passing offensive remarks about his speech and about the presence of 'the communist Kasrils'.

One can say the Jewish community is lucky that these activists are there as symbols but in actual fact we're not aberrations, we're not something unique or an accidental phenomenon thrown up by the community. These are individuals who are actually products of that community. I recognise that I might be challenged by some of my colleagues on this point, who might not

3 Elazar Granot, past leader of Mapam – Israeli United Workers Party – and past chairperson of the Socialist International. Granot is also a published poet, and his work is taught in Israeli high schools.

recognise it, and they have a right to contradict me, but I think every single one of them is in some way a product of that humanistic tradition which I referred to. I think it's strong and goes very deep. The problem that I have with Zionism and even Judaism has been a contradiction and this contradiction I already saw as a young Hebrew pupil at *cheyder*. On the one hand there's a universality, a preaching of a universal God which is the major contribution of Judaism, as I understand it.

Yet this is contradicted by something that as a young person I rejected, the chosen people concept, the exclusivity. I don't want to sound too intellectual a note but I think a whole line of great Jewish agnostics or atheists through Spinoza, Heine, Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Trotsky, Freud grappled with this.

It's the contradiction whereby Zionism includes aspects of the chosen people idea in its discourse, the way the Afrikaner *trekkers* also used it, the way many historical movements have done to advance the cause of a particular people. It's an exclusivity which gives rise to racism and all sorts of negative things.

I couldn't bear that aspect and that's why, going back to your earlier questions, after the young state of Israel had survived it exited from my emotional preoccupations. When I was still going to *cheyder*, we went off to the high holidays, and I can remember saying to my Hebrew teacher on Yom Kippur — the guy up there is marking off all the sins and the good deeds, and we've got to pray for our atonement, but why only us Jews? What about everybody else? It bothered me... [laughs]

He said, 'No, that's because of the greatness of being Jewish, and being the chosen people — we are the ones who have to carry it all, it's our responsibility.' To me it sounded like absolute twaddle. It wasn't a resentment about being kicked out of or excluded from Gentile society, I've never been one of those who've had an aspiration — as a lot of Jews in history and even in South Africa have had — to assimilate. Many Jews, particularly those who've done well in business and become estranged from the Jewish community — Rothschilds, Oppenheimers — it's almost as though they craved a Gentile identity. I never had such an identity problem but as a young boy going to Hebrew School, although I didn't have friends who weren't Jewish, I didn't want to feel that we Jews were special. And therefore apart from an initial little honeymoon with Zionism, which was purely opportunistic — you know, with the Jewish youth movements, being able to get into the various uniforms, meet girls, going to camp in Lakeside [laughs] — you know, once that phase had passed I was totally disinterested.

You've never visited Israel?

No. I've been invited and it's not that I am not ready. As a government official, it depends on state relations, so I'll wait and see when it's going to be

opportune. I am looking forward to going now, although I'm not happy about the status of the Palestinians, and even the status of Arabs within the State of Israel. They talk about equality, but I'll see for myself. The reading that I've done and the questions that I've put to people make me feel that certainly although Arabs can vote in Israel, their actual status and economic position isn't great.

There are diverse political opinions in Israel but we don't often hear about them in the general media or, indeed, in the South African Jewish community. There is a tendency in the Jewish community here to blur, simplify or even ignore important debates.

I have enjoyed meeting people out of the Knesset, there are a number of quite left-wing groupings there, left of labour, peace groups. It's been very interesting. Some of the harshness of my attitude to Israel, the sting of that, has been drawn by meeting these people. I think one can't easily push aside the effects of the Holocaust on Jews and on Israel and I think when I look back, some of my criticism of Israeli foreign policy, of the wars that were fought, was too one-sided. When I look back now I think I too easily adopted a position in which Israel was totally wrong and the neighbouring states and the people they went to war with were correct. It was certainly not clear-cut and the 1967 war, the Six Day War, you know, is a case in point.

Egypt first occupied the Sharem al-Sheik United Nations outpost [on the tip of the Sinai peninsula] and Nasser blockaded the Straits of Tiran so that one of Israel's major supply lines was cut. That provoked that war.

Not that there hasn't been a lot that one can be critical of in human rights terms as well as in expansionist terms, very much so, but that doesn't negate the basic right of existence and of defence. But, you see, one was always very suspicious of its more chauvinist-nationalist expressions, like the youth movement Betar, the movement led by Jabotinsky and later Begin which saw Israel as being on both sides of the Jordan. I remember as a young Betar member (of some six weeks' duration), the songs were always about having land on both sides of the Jordan. One always suspected that that was what Israel's rulers were really after. For me it's really a question of sticking to the United Nations Resolution of 1947 which brought about the State of Israel and of a Palestinian state and those borders. I accept that as an international position.

HG: You must come into contact with the Israeli military?

Yes, highly professional, and I think very concerned about the partnership with apartheid which casts something of a shadow over South Africa-Israeli relations. I think now they're a little shamefaced about helping SA to the extent they did during the worst period of apartheid. They really saved this

country's bacon which was why Vorster and then P W Botha became such strong allies. When you remember Vorster's background, his Nazism, it was a shock that he was so accepted by Israel.[4] Israel had come to South Africa's rescue in terms of weapon supplies, and South Africa subsequently came to Israel's support with weapon supplies of a different kind, especially after the Yom Kippur War, and from then on they had a very close alliance. I've met Israel's military attaché here. We met on a military exercise diplomats had come to observe. Our army chaplain said a prayer and all officers present removed their berets except the Israeli. I winked knowingly at him. That's how we met.

Many Jews are concerned by a perception of growing anti-Semitism in South Africa. Is this something you are aware of?

It surprised me when I returned from exile that there was some talk about the growth of anti-Semitism amongst black people. There has been very little evidence of this and it should not be exaggerated. I know of exactly two occasions. One was an offhand comment by a Muslim member of the ANC at a Cape Town demonstration. The ANC immediately disciplined the individual and condemned his statement. The other was during a recent strike when a couple of workers carried a racist placard against a Jewish employer. The union immediately disassociated itself from the sentiment.

I think there is a tendency for paranoia, and one doesn't blame people given the history, but I think it's very much exaggerated. I don't see this having the basis to really take root because the major employers here, and therefore exploiters, whether on the land, whether in industry or the mines, are not Jewish. In its entire history since 1912, the ANC as the pre-eminent organisation of black people has never made an anti-Semitic statement.

The opposite is the case, and what's more is evident in the personal statements and sentiments of its leaders like Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Ahmed Kathrada and others. But the Jewish community, as business employer and employer of domestic workers in the home situation, has a responsibility to treat people with dignity and respect. My impression is that some racist attitudes are still prevalent in the community which, let us not get away from it, is pretty conservative socially and politically. Most are very ready to condemn the government's shortcomings, particularly with regard to crime in the prosperous white suburbs, and generally in most emotional terms blame the ANC, as though apartheid and white privilege have nothing to do with the problem. The Jewish community has benefited from the years of white privilege and needs to be sensitive to the changing times, using

4 Helen Suzman, asked about the relationship between Israel and South Africa during the seventies and eighties, said she didn't condone it but could understand it, and that one word summed up Israel's motivation: survival.

Jewish history as a lesson and guide to treating people with dignity and respect.

Incidentally, there was a number of ANC members of Muslim background in government and parliament like my close friends Aziz and Essop Pahad, Dullah Omar, Ahmed Kathrada and Kader Asmal — people who respect all religions and are as secular as me. Back in 1991 I had to stress to the then Israeli Ambassador, a narrow right-wing Likud man, that there was no Muslim cabal in the ANC. A stupid and laughable idea. In fact, they've all had an affinity with Jews in or out of the Movement for years. Fortunately that Ambassador was replaced by an extremely enlightened individual, Alon Liel, who served here between 1992-94 and played a most constructive role in repairing bridges with the ANC.

IS: Now you're a technocrat, involved with arms deals etc. It's a big-spending world, with lots of lucrative kickbacks for contracts awarded, lots of dirty deals, corruption. How are you going to keep yourself clean? Do you have some kind of moral immunity?

I'm not a technocrat, but of course there is no such thing as moral immunity unless you're God and there's no one to judge you but yourself. I'm a representative of a democratic movement in government, and the ANC has a strict code of conduct I adhere to. Jack Simons, Ray Alexander's late husband, one of our leading Marxist theoreticians, used to teach that human beings required codes and structures to reinforce their moral commitments. I agree with that, irrespective of how morally strong one might feel as an individual. The struggle for liberation created a strong culture of serving the cause rather than oneself. That has rubbed off on me and determines my sense of commitment. Working from a government ministry and in comfortable and secure accommodation relative to a bush camp need not undermine one's dedication.

There are a number of incidents you describe in* Armed and Dangerous *where you had very close brushes with death. A lot of adolescents go through an intoxicating phase of feeling invulnerable — that's why so many of them indulge in high-risk behaviours. Would you say that you remained a perpetual adolescent, not just as far as a sense of invulnerability is concerned but also in a romantic optimism, that belief in human beings which you talked about earlier on?

Not even as a schoolboy did I feel invulnerable. Too often I was caught out by teachers and suffered a severe caning. My childhood made me quite brave and somewhat daring. I loved outdoor adventure and physical activities. I was good at sport. I often got into fist fights over anti-Semitic comments and was not afraid to stand up to playground bullies. I felt fear but was able to stand my ground instead of fleeing.

So I learned at a fairly young age to control fear to some extent. But I never indulged in reckless behaviour like playing 'chicken', or other mindless activity.

When I began breaking the law of the state as a twenty-year-old it was out of moral outrage and conviction that my actions were just. I stole dynamite, blew up electric pylons and railway lines. At that time I lived with Rowley and Jackie Arenstein. Rowley opposed the sabotage campaign, and out of concern for my safety (he guessed at my involvement) pointed out that just one slip would bring the might of the state down on an individual. We saw some French film at the Durban film society about a small slip-up leading to the downfall of a murderer, and I remember Rowley emphasising the point. With a transient foreboding of doom, I pressed on with my career as saboteur and revolutionary guerrilla combatant. That life was no picnic. It involved fear, pain, loneliness, separation for long periods from loved ones, the ever-present possibility of ambush, betrayal, imprisonment, torture, death. Too many of my close comrades perished for me to feel invulnerable. The optimism running through my blood has been the necessary antidote to the shocks, blows and loss.

If we weren't optimistic we would have given up long ago. The optimism resulted from a deep conviction in the justness of our cause. To paraphrase Fidel Castro, a soldier is not born to be brave or cowardly — heroism depends on the cause you serve. Romantic optimism has nothing to do with adolescent rashness and everything to do with eternal hope.

Which leaders made the greatest impression on you? Tambo, Madiba, Sobukwe, Dadoo . . .

I worked with Tambo, Dadoo, Slovo over three decades of exile. I never knew Sobukwe.

Oliver Tambo kept the ANC intact throughout the most difficult period, when the Movement had almost been crushed and Mandela and others were in prison for life. To lead in those circumstances required single-mindedness, dedication and the utmost integrity. He was a man of tremendous self-control who never spared himself, a workaholic who led by example. He maintained a frugal, even ascetic life style, at a time when apartheid propaganda reported us exiles as living in the lap of luxury. The only 'indulgence' he allowed himself was the ethnic African shirts he enjoyed wearing.

Tambo struggled to keep in touch with his wife and children in England — he was mostly in Africa — and his family life suffered. Back in South Africa, during the period between his debilitating stroke in 1989 and his death in 1993, my wife Eleanor worked with him on his papers, and I got to know him on a more personal level. He bravely continued to perform his duties as chairperson of the ANC but was able to relax for the first time in decades, with the mantle of responsibility passing to Mandela. I saw this austere father

figure who had dominated our proceedings in exile visibly soften and relax, and an extremely warm, personable Tambo emerge. The demands of the Struggle produced people of heroic stature, but its exigencies deprived them of the opportunity for carefree enjoyment and sublime normality.

I have a special affection for, and abiding memory of, Yusuf Dadoo, Joe Slovo, and Jack Hodgson. We formed a tightly knit quartet in London for a full decade (1966-76) from where we planned and directed clandestine activities. I learned a great deal from them about the theory and craft of revolution, as well as about being a human being. Slovo, in his 'unfinished autobiography', credits Dadoo with the Communist Party's survival in exile. I don't wish to detract from Yusuf — a modest, dignified man who enjoyed tremendous respect within our movement and internationally — but the driving force was unquestionably Joe Slovo. Together with Dadoo and Tambo he forged the unity of the ANC and SACP. He was our leading theoretician and strategist, a brilliant planner of operations, a multi-talented individual of wit, enthusiasm and flair. Formidable in debate, once he made up his mind about something, he was relentless about getting his own way.

His Yiddish sense of humour often expressed itself as, for example, during the 1993 debate around how much the ANC should compromise with the National Party government. He accused those of us resisting further compromises of 'threatening to seize defeat from the jaws of victory'. He could be very subjective, and arouse bitterness, anger, and at times exasperation. But he was lovable, my *chaveyr* and a mensch. In a moving funeral oration at the Avalon Cemetery in Soweto, Helena Dolny, his widow, referred to his passion for life — 'for wine, women and song'. This elicited a hoarse approving murmur from the Soweto poor, packed in dense ranks as near the grave as possible. This response still stands out for me as a moment of sheer Brechtian expression, from the 'lower depths' for whom Joe Slovo gave his all. His funeral was an ANC funeral — a type of mass rally, in fact — where amongst other figures the Chief Rabbi spoke. Joe was buried in a simple pine coffin with rope handles. This Judaic simplicity became a topic of conversation. Blacks, whether rich or poor, are under tremendous pressure to provide the most ornate coffin possible in the circumstances of bereavement.

Joe Modise, minister of Defence and long-time colleague of Slovo's, was so moved by the egalitarian symbolism that he expressed the hope that others would follow the example.

I can't resist adding another person to this list, because he is undoubtedly the most perfect mensch I've ever known. Walter Sisulu, now aged 84, was the mentor of Mandela and Tambo from 1942. He quietly steered the ANC alliance from behind. A human being of infinite wisdom and compassion, he is warm, affectionate, and approachable — everybody's favourite *tata* [father].

There has always been a formidable collective leadership in the ANC-led alliance, and this has helped to mould the finest qualities of Albert Luthuli,

Nelson Mandela, Bram Fischer or Lilian Ngoyi, as well as leaders of the next generation — Chris Hani, Thabo Mbeki, Cyril Ramaphosa and Cheryl Carolus. One must bear in mind that they are all first and foremost products of the Struggle, irrespective of their varied backgrounds, be they black, white, brown, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu or Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Tswana, English or Afrikaans speaking. '*Motho ke motho ka batho babang*' (A person is a person because of other people) sums up the meaning of *ubuntu* in our country.

Finally, anything else that's relevant about Ronnie Kasrils the human being?

I don't mind the label of 'romantic revolutionary'; I believe I've shown myself to be sober and pragmatic in my present job — although, like Anne Frank wrote in her diary, it's necessary 'to keep one's ideals alive'. I resent the allegation of having been 'reckless' or 'cavalier' about the lives of others and believe this is unfair. I've had the responsibility of variously handling, directing, commanding and leading others in dangerous missions and campaigns. I never asked or expected anyone to do something I hadn't done or wasn't prepared to do, myself. My record shows that I led from the front on many occasions. I was always concerned about the safety of my charges and felt any arrest or death in the pit of my being. We planned to avoid casualties, and strove to avoid adventure, but plans come unstuck and there is no such thing as a casualty-free strategy. At times there were miscalculations, errors of judgement, easy to condemn with the benefit of 20-20 hindsight, and those things I regret. But I don't regret the life I've led. I might have had a 'romantic ideal' but I never romanticised the dangers and the risks we were forced to take.

I feel I am not hidebound by my past attitudes or theories. I hate being dogmatic or pompous. I find it difficult at times to be patient with people, although I have got better at it. But my patience still wears thin on occasion with the selfish demands and expectations of privileged white South Africans. Especially the ones who become frustrated with the ANC over crime and claim they always opposed apartheid because they voted for Helen Suzman.

They are seemingly unaware that during the long exile years Suzman was mostly at odds with the ANC positions on armed struggle, economic sanctions, etc. Her tone was frequently abrasive and Oliver Tambo strongly criticised her.

I concede that the State of Israel has helped us to get past the tragic stage of Jews as passive objects of history. I regret that this has been at the expense of the Palestinian people and hope that this can now be put right. I am happy in my work and what we have achieved in South Africa, although there is still a long way to go.

There is nothing I love more than my wife's company, and relaxing with her and our family. I am thankful that my mother is still alive, aged 87, and in relatively good shape. After the years of strange life styles we've also been able

to come close to my wife's parents, Helen and Jimmy Logan, and my sister and brother-in-law, Hilary and Abe Jaffe. This has meant a lot to me.

It's true that I like calling myself a 'Yeoville boykie'. Yeoville in the forties and early fifties was my *medina* [Hebrew, literally 'state' but used colloquially in Yiddish to mean 'my turf'] and those rumbustious school-days gave me a zest for life.

JACK FLIOR

'I was disappointed with the Jewish god
and I'm also disappointed with the Marxist god.'

Jack Flior came to South Africa in 1932 from Dvinsk, Latvia, after being imprisoned there for communist activity. In South Africa he continued to be an active communist and trade unionist in Johannesburg and Cape Town, and an important member of the Jewish Workers Club. He was a committed follower of the Russian Communist Party, and was the only South African to fight with the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War. He also served for a time as an interpreter on a Russian icebreaker. After 1948 he became disillusioned with communism and withdrew completely from politics.

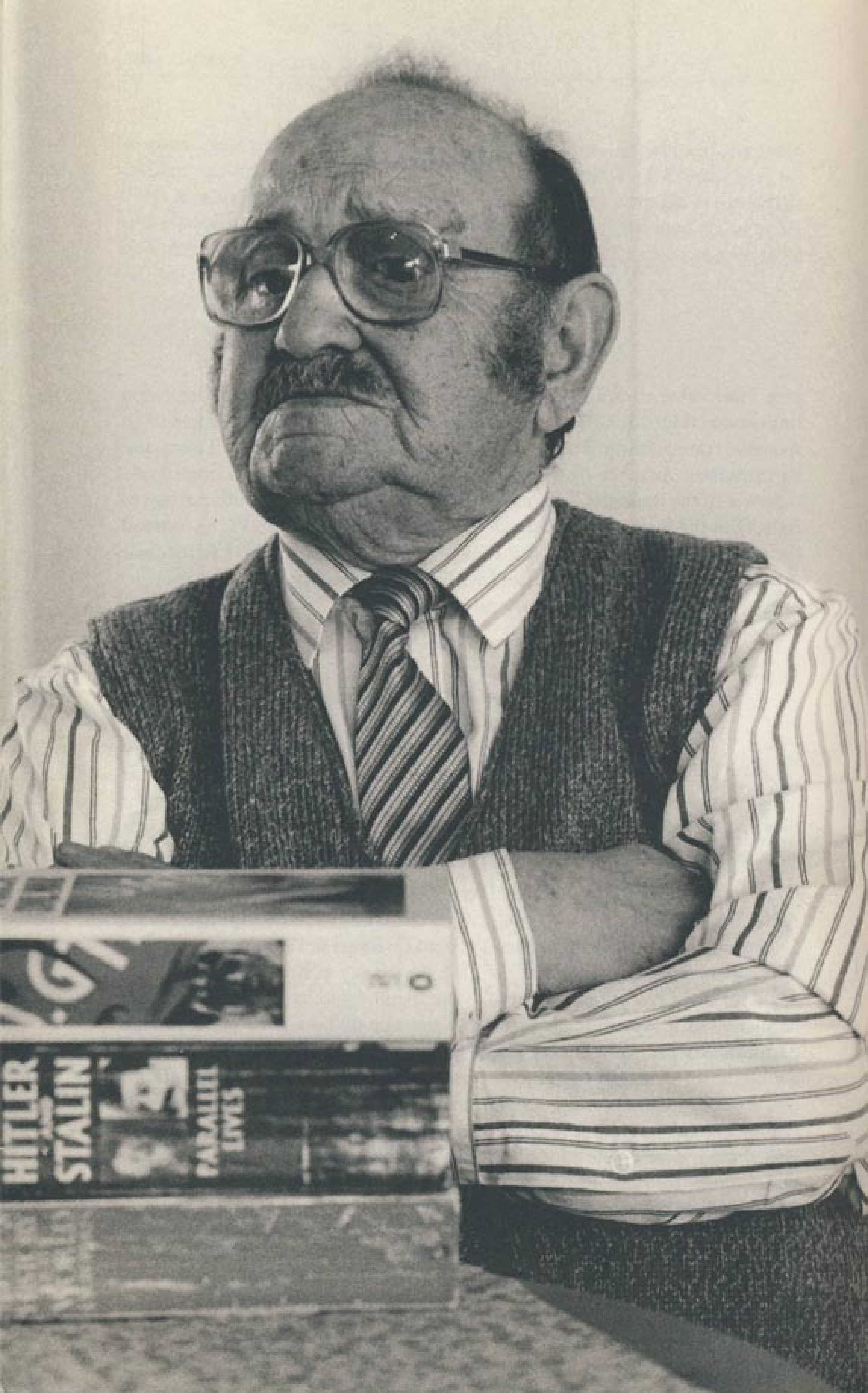
Jack Flior died in Johannesburg on 29 June 1996.

Interviewed by Geoff Sifrin
9 October 1994
Johannesburg

Can you tell me something about the beginnings of your political activities and the atmosphere that shaped your political philosophy.

I was born in 1915 in a town called Dvinsk in Latvia. My father came to South Africa in 1928, and my brother Morris in '31. I was a member of the Young Communist League (YCL) in Latvia and was arrested in 1932 at age seventeen for distributing communist leaflets. That started my political activities. I was in jail for three weeks and was let out on remand. I had to report to the police regularly, so it was difficult for me to get out of Latvia, to get a foreign passport. My family was very poor but, through an uncle, I was helped to get out and I managed to come to South Africa. The papers were ready for me, from my father, and I arrived here in September 1932. We stayed in Gordon Road, in Bertrams. My father[1] was a house-painter — a very well-versed man, who wrote a lot of books in Yiddish. One of them is translated into English by Bernard Sachs, Albie Sachs's uncle — the one on Dvinsk. Well, life here the first year was very difficult, but we managed, the three of us, my brother and my father and I. I worked as a cabinet-maker. I am a

1 Yudel Flior.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graduated cabinet-maker from Dvinsk. We worked very hard in the family, and we brought out my mother and my younger brother and my two young sisters . . .

Was your family religious in Dvinsk?

Mmmm, what shall I say? I am an atheist, until today. The thing is, we weren't really a strong religious family, but my father used to go Shabat into the synagogue, and he used to take us, we were little boys. I'm a child of the First World War, and we were refugees in Petrograd when the Revolution took place, when I was two years of age and Morris, my brother, was five. Then my father took us back to Dvinsk, and he went back to Petrograd, so what happened then is the Bolsheviks came to Dvinsk and it became a Soviet Dvinsk . . . So when I came to South Africa, I got in touch with the Communist Party, which had an office close to where now is John Vorster Square. There was a member named Louis Joffe at that time, the brother of Max Joffe the doctor. Louis was a devoted communist and took me around all over the place. As a matter of fact, my inclination was always towards the Russian Revolution. The Jewish revolutionaries were Leon Trotsky, Sverdlov, Martov, Karl Radek, and many others. I want to tell you that at one time, in the very early days in South Africa, I supported the Trotskyites, and I was expelled from the Party for about a month or two. I realised my mistake, and I rejoined the party again. Have you heard of the divisions that were taking place in those days, with Bunting and others, whether there would be a revolution in South Africa, whether it would be a workers' revolution or whether it would be a nationalist revolution? There were people who were supporting Bunting, and we had very great respect for them . . . I didn't actually know Bunting — he was already expelled from the Party because the Comintern wanted black leadership in the SA Communist Party. By the way, his son Brian Bunting is now a member of parliament for the ANC.

One of the finest people in the Communist Party was a man by the name of Eddie Roux. I associated with Eddie Roux's group. His wife, Winnie Lunt, was a schoolteacher, and she had a lady's bicycle. Eddie Roux was publishing a newspaper called the *Umsebenzi* (which means 'Work'), and he himself was going around with this lady's bicycle and selling this newspaper. Soon I became a courier for it in the Jewish Workers Club. The people there were mainly immigrants — I don't remember a single person there who was not an immigrant. They were mostly anti-religious atheists.

Left:
Jack Flior (Photograph: Gisèle Wulfsohn)

As a result of their socialist upbringing in Eastern Europe?

That is correct. Most of them were Lithuanians, and there were some Latvians and a few Polish people. Now, I organised a whole group of young people to distribute *Umsebenzi*, and we used to get on the African buses in those days — I'm talking in the time of Smuts, not of Verwoerd — and we used to come to Sophiatown, to Alexandra township, and we were selling *Umsebenzi* from door to door for a penny a paper.

There I was very friendly with the African people, especially two — Ramutla and Tefu. They used to stand up on the platform and talk to the people, organising for the Communist Party. The crowds used to come, something like twenty or thirty people. And when you used to ask somebody to join the Communist Party, he used to take out a card — he belonged to the ICU (the Industrial and Commercial Union), whose leader was Clements Kadalie. It was a very big union. I didn't know anything about them, because when I came to South Africa they were already dissolved. Kadalie had already run away with the money... I don't know what happened.

As I say, the controversy was going on within the Party, which I didn't understand very much, with Bunting's expulsion — a Stalinist idiotic policy. And there were three communists, I was told, who went to Russia. There was Kotane (also known as Pilane), the secretary of the Party — a black man. Then there was J B Marks, who was later the organiser of the mineworkers' union. The third one was Edwin Mafutsenyani — a very honest man indeed and I liked him very much. And I was told — you see I was still young and I didn't know any English at all — I was told that Kotane was a very clever man. As a matter of fact, I had a helluva lot of business with Kotane in later years. And there was also a coloured man by the name of Nikin, who became active in the furniture workers' union. The only thing I remember about the four of them — when they came back from Russia they took over the party. Nikin went into industry — he worked for Edblos — and I had to buy for him half a bottle of brandy because coloured people weren't allowed to buy drink in those days.

Could you tell me something about the newspaper Umsebenzi.

Look, I could hardly read it, because of my English. It was a workers' paper they were selling to the workers, and telling them what was happening in Sophiatown, Alexandra and other places. Eddie Roux was the editor, he was also the publisher, he was also the seller, and he was a professor at Wits University. It is said that the university gave him an ultimatum — either you are leaving the Communist Party or you are leaving the professorship. So he left the professorship. He was a liberal, a very interesting man, and he wrote a couple of books. One is called *Time Longer Than Rope*, published in 1966. He

tells about the first black revolt in South Africa by a man named Chief Bambatha in Greytown in Natal. As a matter of fact, the workers in the place where I now work call me 'Chief Bambatha' whenever I go there. Eddie was a character — in the end they didn't expel him from the Party but he left the Party himself. I met him in Cape Town a number of times. When the university kicked him out, he became an attendant at a swimming pool, and after that he got a job in the fisheries, I think Irwin and Johnson. After that they took him back at the university, and he became a professor of botany. It was very interesting times in those days!

I believed in those days — those idiotic days — that the Revolution is going to come to Europe. Now how can I get away from South Africa? So I got my father to agree to become a naturalised person, I being twenty years of age, that means a minor according to the laws of South Africa, so I also became a British subject. The lawyer was Bunting. We used to meet where the Carlton Hotel is now. There was a barber shop owned by a fellow by the name of Issy Diamond. He was one of the real characters. He organised unemployed workers and he took them into the Carlton Hotel and he says, 'Serve these people!' They arrested him and put him in jail. He was one of the finest orators I have ever heard in my life. He was a Jew but he must have been born in South Africa. The Afrikaners shouted at him, 'Issy, how would you like your sister to get married to a kaffir?' So he says, 'I would be very sorry for the kaffir!' Well, now I became a British subject, and I was a reasonably good cabinet-maker. I was twenty-one in 1936 and I left for England.

Did you become involved in politics in England?

Yes, I thought the Revolution was coming. I worked in factories there, and I was very active in the Communist Party in London. Then I wanted to go to Spain when the civil war broke out. But I had some problems. First of all, I have got a very bad eye — when I was a boy me and a friend were mending a football in Dvinsk and the needle went into my eye — and, secondly, I had no military experience. They wouldn't accept people with no military experience. So I carried on working in the factory. The work was seasonal and at Christmas time they put off the majority of the workers. In the end they called me in the office and they gave me notice that I should come back after Christmas. So instead of coming back, I went back to South Africa and I got again work in a factory. Then I read a notice in *Inprecor* — the International Press Correspondence which was published in Europe for the communist parties all over the world (at a later stage the great man who worked there as the editor was Geminder, a Jew). I read in the *Inprecor* that there was an appeal that anybody with or without military experience could now join the International Brigade. So that meant me. I got right away a ticket to London, then I went to Paris, Arles, Peppinjan, and we crossed the Pyrenees by foot. I nearly collapsed there, you have no idea what a difficult

thing it was to go through the whole night. And we came through to a place called Figueros, and from there we were transferred to Albaseta. This was a training base for the British Battalion — we were very badly trained, we didn't have any guns or anything like it. The only time they gave us a gun was when we stood on guard. And on the 26th of March the brigade was walking on the road on the Aragon front near a village called Calaceite, and we came face to face with Italian tanks. Well, there was such a great massacre that you have no idea. The record said that 150 Britishers got killed, and the others dispersed, wherever we could get away, and I got also away somewhere. It was such a massacre — I was lying behind a big rock, and the aeroplanes started bombing. It was such an unequal meeting with these people. They massacred all the five International Brigades. And in the evening the same day I walked out and I was captured by the Italians. I landed up in a place called San Pedro de Cardena, and there were quite a lot of Internationalists there — British, Americans, Italians, Germans, Poles, Portuguese, Canadians, Bulgarians, Swiss, and Jews from Poland who spoke Yiddish. There was talk a helluva lot about me in South Africa in those days — if you pick up the newspaper — in the *Sunday Express* and the *Sunday Times*. There was talk about exchanging me for some big-bloody-well-shot of the fascists. All these things didn't materialise until the war was almost over in 1939. I was close to a year a prisoner. And I came back to South Africa and I was supposed to be a hero, because I was the only South African who went to Spain.

What was it like for you to come back to South Africa? What did you do when you got back?

When I came back to South Africa I was going to devote myself to the Communist Party, that's all. I didn't want to know anything else. I became again active in the Jewish Workers Club, became the secretary, and life went on like this . . . When I came back from Spain, the Communist Party said we must get members. This young brother of mine, Mendel, was associated with Hashomeyr hatzair. They were a nice group of people, and I got some of them into the Communist Party. Also the girl that I married, I got her into the Communist Party. She remained a communist for a very long time — she was arrested with the Treason Trial people — Sarah Haak.

One of the finest people in the Jewish Workers Club was Faivke Voronoff. When the Nats won the election in 1948, Faivke and myself buried all the communist documents in the yard of the Jewish Workers Club. We went in the middle of the night and dug a big hole, the earth was terrible hard, and we buried all these things. We put the documents in a metal tin and buried the tin. Years afterwards I met Voronoff and I asked him what happened to those documents, and he said they are in good hands. By the way, he was the only one in the whole of South Africa who got from the Russians a Soviet passport, as a Soviet citizen.

The Russians had a consulate in South Africa during the war, and he wanted to go to Russia but they wouldn't let him. Eventually his daughter went to Israel, and he went there and died there on a kibbutz.

Solly Sachs, the organiser of the Garment Workers Union, was a member of the Communist Party at the time of Bunting, and when they expelled Bunting, they also expelled Andrews, Solly Sachs, Weinbron, Taylor, all the trade union leaders in the movement. In the 1922 strike the Communist Party was taking a very active role. Solly Sachs was a very clever man, and he had two sons, Albie and the other one whose name I can't remember. He had difficulty reading, but he took everyone who opposed the trade union movement to court. He prepared his own cases, and he always used to win. He was threatened a couple of times, and he was forced to go to England. Otherwise he would have been killed. The secretary of the mineworkers' union had already been assassinated, and next on the list of the right-wing Afrikaners was Solly Sachs, because he had organised some Afrikaner women, such as Anna Scheepers, Dulcie Hartwell and Johanna Cornelius.

Many years later when I was in London I became very friendly with Solly Sachs; we were almost inseparable. I was at his flat almost every day. We used to go and listen to the Russian authors together. At that time he was actually in contact with Russia, and he told me that when the phone rings I must turn away and not listen to him. He also told me that if only I would stop my idiotic Trotskyite ideas, then he and I could go to Russia together and come back and write a book about how good things are there. Later I left for South Africa and he died there years later.

I came back from Spain in April 1939 and the Second World War broke out in September. And in September I got work in Pretoria making desks for the government, huge big desks, and I brought out all my friends there to make ammunition boxes. My younger brother too. In the beginning Russia was not in the war, and first of all we were called *communazis* because we didn't support the war. We called it an imperialist war, because Stalin told us to call it an imperialist war. I remember working for Shepherd and Barker, one of the finest firms making antique furniture, and the Party told me that we shouldn't support the war. And the Afrikaners, you know, they also didn't support the war — well they found in me a comrade, a friend. But then when Russia got into the war, then the communists became the greatest supporters of the war... I wanted to go to Russia, so I went to the Japanese consulate, and they gave me a letter that I may go through Japan. However, financial and personal problems caused me to take other ways.

What did you do while the war was on?

I also got involved with a little girl here — I got married and I got divorced. I was very unsettled, so I went to Cape Town, where I started the Garage Workers Union, took them out on strike once, and... I was a real

adventurer. You've heard of Ray Alexander? She was organising the Canning Workers Union, and she had a coloured chap with her. So the coloured chap went away and organised in Wellington and Cape Town and places like that. So he came to me and said Ray is sick, and he took me around that I should go and organise the people for a strike. I went to Wellington and I took out on strike the Canning Workers Union, and I walked there right in front of everyone. There was a demonstration — you know, I was the only white man with all the coloured workers. And then a woman came running like hell and she told one of the girls that the right-wing Afrikaners are going to kill me. Well, to tell you the truth I got scared. I phoned them in Cape Town to come out and help me. So they came, Bella Page and a few others, and they helped me, and we came to a settlement of the strike.

I also got my own people at Hollis Retreading out on strike. I walked into the office and there was Harry Snitcher, the chairman of the Communist Party, and Bill Andrews, who asked me if I had money to support the strike. He said I should try to get a negotiation for a settlement. So the bosses at Hollis Retreading took me into the office, offered me a cup of tea, and we came to a settlement.

Another thing I did at that time was take six coloured workers into parliament to see the minister of Labour, Medelley. I think I was among the first to do so. The Native Representative, Mr Molteno, was with me.

So then, by luck, a Russian boat arrives in Cape Town, an icebreaker by the name *Mikoyan*. And what did they need? An interpreter. 'Sure I'll go,' I said. I was only too pleased to go. The British Admiralty gave me a document and the Russians took me.

What was this Russian boat doing in Cape Town?

They came out from the Black Sea. They were actually attacked by the Italians, and they had a lot of holes all over the place... Now how could they go to Russia? They had to go around South Africa and South America, Cape Horn — Uruguay, Chile, Peru, Panama. Then eventually we came to San Francisco, where they had to put me off. I wanted to go to Russia and they were supposed to put me off in San Francisco. The Americans came with their interpreter and the Russians said they wanted Yasha — they called me Yasha. So from there we went up to Seattle and Alaska, Dutch Harbour, and there I was told, 'Yasha, we can't take you to Russia,' and they put me off there. So the Americans came and they took me to Seattle and to New York.

Being on this Russian boat was the closest contact you had had with Russia so far. What was it like for you?

Well, to tell you the truth about the Russian boat, I was so disappointed that I can't believe it... What I discovered about them was that they had two kinds

of people, the ordinary sailors who really worked, very nice people, and then there were the bureaucrats (I was an officer and I was with them) who did no work and got all the privileges — high pay, etc. The inequality between them was much more than the inequality between a white man and a black man in South Africa! And this was a communist ship! And that's what hurt me more than anything while I was on the ship. The ordinary sailors were eating *kasha* (oatmeal), while there in the cabin we had pigs, meat, caviar, wine, vodka, anything we wanted! I was sitting at the captain's table; he was a nice man, Captain Serge'ev, but then he had a man by the name of Nikitin who was the secret police. This Nikitin, I want to tell you that my life was in danger from that fellow. One day, he was sleeping at night, and he was talking in his sleep about the whores and the women and all these kind of things, and then he got up and I was in his office, and he says to me, 'What did I say? Come on, tell me the truth, what did I say?' And he takes out a gun and says, 'I'll shoot you, you bastard!' And I swear to God, never in my life have I been in such danger of being shot as by that fellow Nikitin.

Then I was in New York six months. Then they sent me back to South Africa. I was very lonely in New York. At first the Communist Party there thought that I am a spy, and by luck one of the chaps came in and said 'Oh, what are you doing here?' We were together in prison. I didn't have a good time in New York, but I found a family there. But you see, I am a communist and they were a middle-class family and we couldn't see eye-to-eye.

So I came to South Africa and the war was still on. My younger brother Mendel got killed in Italy in 1944. He was fighting with the South African troops in the Engineers Corps. When I came from the Russian boat I wanted to join up (for the army). But I had trouble with my eye, and I didn't want to go with the fighting forces. So in 1946 I was unsettled, and I went back to Cape Town, and started organising there, helping the trade unions, and I started to organise the Workers' Charter.

I organised meetings all around Cape Town and the surrounding areas, and I became very popular among the coloured workers — a fellow named Fransman said 'Now we have a leader!' In particular I was friendly with a man named Johnny Gomas, a coloured fighter for freedom and a communist of very long standing whom I knew well in Johannesburg. As a matter of fact I felt like a fish in water. But I think at that time I already started giving up the Communist Party.

Johnny Gomas had a woman shop steward in the Canning Workers Union who was sacked because she was doing trade union work. He tried to get her reinstated, but he didn't succeed. So I came to a plan with him — there were some beautiful girls there who used to complain that they were sexually harassed by foremen. So I said to Gomas, 'Go and tell the boss that if he doesn't take that woman back, we will expose this in the newspapers.' The boss told us to do whatever we liked, he didn't care. So I went to Harry Snitcher, an advocate, and he took affidavits from the girls, that they were

harassed by the foremen. Then Johnny Gomas went to the bosses and told them if the woman was not reinstated he would publish the affidavits in the papers. So she was immediately reinstated.

Can you tell me a little about your involvement with the black and coloured workers?

I told you already about when I started selling *Umsebenzi* in my early days. As a matter of fact, I was friendly with Kotane, the secretary of the Communist Party. I brought him to my house, as early as 1934... In the furniture workers' union I always co-operated with Nikin. The main organiser of the left-wingers was Willie Kalk, and we succeeded in installing a coloured man as chairman of the union, which was unprecedented. His opponent was an Afrikaner, De Wet. In those days there were a helluva lot of Jews in the furniture trade — cabinet-makers, upholsterers, etc. I think 12 per cent we were.

Did you believe in those days that the black workers would become good socialists, and take on the ideas of socialism in a serious way?

Oh, I did believe in the black workers. Yes, we always had faith in them, but I didn't ever believe, you know, that sangomas, tribal chiefs, witchdoctors and these kind of people will become important! I mean, what are they? I mean, when Mandela was inaugurated recently, you see two chaps start dancing around him as religious blokes. You know, to me they are savages! I'm sorry, but they are savages!

So if you think that they are savages, how did you relate to the black workers...?

The black workers, the trade unionists in Cape Town and Johannesburg, were conscious people, and their leaders like Kotane, Mafutsenyane and Marks were as good as any European leaders. Kotane was a very clever man, and Mafutsenyane — I liked him!

But a lot of the black workers in the unions must have been unsophisticated, in your terms. If you think that the sangomas are savages, then how did you relate to them...?

They were industrial workers, and industrial workers were reasonable people... we never had prejudice, or anything like it. For example, at the Jewish Workers Club we had a wonderful library, very fine people, very fine theatre (we put up Shalom Aleichem, *The Dybbuk* and things like it). We had blacks coming to talk to us there. J B Marks, I remember, came on the platform and gave a lecture, and arguments. The Jewish Workers Club was

really forward — it was anti-Zionist and it was anti-religion, but they were very progressive! And of course then there was the fight between Yiddish and Hebrew, and the Jewish Workers Club was taking the part of Yiddish. Zitlovsky's followers. I mean, it was progressive! We had the newspaper, the *Proletarische Shtime* (the Proletarian Voice) — I was working for it too. It was a wall-paper, a paper on the wall, and then later a cyclostyled journal.

Did you expect that blacks would become communists?

We never expected them to become dominant. We expected to be equal partners. But we did not expect them to start dictating what to do and what not to do. You see, that was the controversy in the time after Bunting. There was a man by the name of Lazar Bach, and he was fighting against Kotane. Kotane was saying there must be a national revolution taking place in South Africa, and Bach was talking about a workers' republic...

That was the idea of the South African Native Republic. The South African Communist Party adopted that policy.

Yes. Bach and the two Richter brothers went over to Moscow to present all the documents, and Kotane went over also to present his documents at the Comintern. It stands to reason — Stalin sent Kotane back to South Africa and Bach and the Richter brothers he sent to Siberia. The South African Native Republic meant that the African National Congress would become the dominant force. Slovo supported this idea. Joe Slovo was much younger than me, but I came across him at a conference. And his wife, Ruth First, she was a wonderful communist, a firebrand, and always in consultation with Bram Fischer, the chairman of the South African Communist Party.

After the war ended I went to London and then also to Paris, and I worked in a factory. I went to the Communist Party in Paris but I was very disappointed with them. When I came back to South Africa in 1948 I had already decided to leave the Communist Party. But I didn't leave immediately. It's not so easy to get out — all my friends were there.

Why did you want to leave the Communist Party? Were you disillusioned, or what?

It started off... you know, I never believed in Stalin, that bloody bastard! You see, first of all there was a fellow by the name of Rajek, a great internationalist, in the International Brigade. He was foreign minister of Hungary afterwards. So he was accused of being a counter-revolutionary and they executed him. Then there were many other top generals and comrades in the International Brigade of Spain who were accused as spies and traitors and were shot. Then Slansky in Czechoslovakia, the secretary of

the Communist Party, and Geminder, the editor of the *Inprecor*, were accused of being Zionist spies – they shot them. So I started asking myself, if I would have been in Russia, I would have been accused of being a spy, because anybody that lived *za granitshe*, that means outside of Russia in a foreign country, was a suspect. Then they started killing off all the leaders of the International Brigade, and the members. They killed almost all of them. The main man, Chopek, who was the leader of the 15th International Brigade, they shot him!

Russian communism did the world the greatest harm! In the old days I used to think it was OK to take away from the rich and give to the poor. I don't think so any more. You know, what happened in Russia was that Stalin and his bureaucrats took away from the poor and gave to the rich.

And what about the Communist Party in South Africa? Were they also following the Russian, the Stalinist, line?

They did! Fully! That Slovo, he was the main general of the MK, and Slovo was always coming in and out of Russia. He must have been a friend of Ceausescu, secretary of the Rumanian Communist Party, and Erich Honeker – the biggest bastards! There was last Sunday in the paper a photograph of Slovo in East Germany as a delegate to the Communist Party with Honeker, Gorbachev and others.

But your problem was with the Russian Communist Party, not with socialism as such. Were you still a socialist at that time?

Yes... Look here, in '48 I went out to Rhodesia. I was brought out as a foreman for a big factory. I stayed there for about a year and I became a very active member of the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers. I was a trustee. Then they elected me to the Trades and Labour Council for Rhodesian unions in Salisbury. And it was in this time that a cousin of mine wrote to me that I should come to Israel.

But you were anti-Zionist then. Weren't you against the State of Israel?

I was never against it. I wasn't for it. I was quite impartial to it. You see, I wasn't a Zionist. Look, I wasn't a Jew in the sense of going to a shul. I've never been to a shul since the age of fourteen, but I wasn't against a kibbutz or anything like that.

But most of the people you were involved with were probably anti-Zionist, I would guess...

Anti-Zionist from a theoretical point of view. We never believed that

Palestine can be liberated — a Jewish State, or something like that. But we weren't against the people. As a matter of fact, Israeli communists used to come to South Africa, and we were quite delighted. We weren't against Arabs. So when I went to Israel, I stayed there for about three years. I wanted to become politically active there, but I found that every Jew wanted to be the prime minister. I lived in a kibbutz called Kfar Giladi, in the north. A Mapai[2] kibbutz. I lived there one year as a *po'el sachir* [hired worker], then I went to another kibbutz called Hazor. At one time I organised the English-speaking people for the election. I worked for a while with Simha Flapan.

So then I came back to South Africa, and I wasn't anti-Zionist any more, but I also wasn't a communist. I became secretary of the Poalei Zion here, for about ten years. The Mapai. I was friendly with Yigal Allon[3] when he was here. I took him all over the place.

Many Jews were very active in the communist movement over the years. What is your view of this?

As I told you in the beginning, in the Russian Revolution you had a very big percentage of the leaders who were Jewish. They were all assimilated, anti-religious Jews. They were also against any religion. Lenin was a great friend of Martov of the Social Democrats, a Jew. In our imagination in those days every Russian Jew who was a great politician was also a great friend of the other nations. When I was in jail in Latvia, there were fifteen or sixteen people in a cell, overcrowded. The main chap there, Kukla, was a Jew, but then we had a fellow there, Svarinsky, who was a Let; there was another one, Leibz, who was a Pole; another one, Vlassov, a White Russian . . . I can still remember their names from so long ago, but I can't remember what happened yesterday . . .

How can I say it, we didn't think about whether we are Jews or Christians. We lived in a common place . . . In South Africa it was also like that. It didn't matter if you were a Jew or a black man or a coloured, there was no differentiation.

How were your relationships with the mainstream Jewish community?

The Jewish Workers Club had representatives in the Jewish Board of Deputies, but I wasn't participating in this. I was always with the communists.

Before the war, there was a lot of fascist activity in South Africa — the Greyshirts,

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2 Mapai: Israeli Workers Party, a social democratic party headed by David Ben-Gurion, which was the dominant force in Israeli politics between 1930 and 1968.

3 Israeli commander and later foreign minister of Israel.

etc. Can you tell me something about your activities against them?

Oh, we were fighting like hell all the time. I was arrested one time, on the steps of the Town Hall. The Greyshirts used to come there and organise their meetings and we used to come and break it up. I remember the paper reported that two children were arrested — that was me and my younger brother. You see, I was wearing short pants and they thought I was a child. But it was not only Jews fighting against them — in those days there was Johanna Cornelius, an Afrikaner woman and her sister, Esther. We also went to Pretoria to break up meetings of the Greyshirts.

On one occasion we demonstrated against the Blackshirts, and the man who was leading them was Vorster, who was South African prime minister in later years. I remember him dressed in black shirt and black trousers. The Jewish Workers Club participated, but there were other people also. One of our members, Menahem Mendel Yudelowitz, who was born in Palestine, was with us. He jumped up at the flag of the Blackshirts, pulled it down and tore it up. And then everyone fell upon him, and we pulled him out, bleeding.

You didn't really get involved in any anti-apartheid activities, did you? When you left communism, you basically left politics?

After I came back from Israel, yes . . . But let me tell you something about the communists — you know in the election [in 1994] the ANC put up a list, and all the top ten people on the list were communists, don't let them tell you otherwise. Mandela was a communist, Mbeki was a communist, Ramaphosa was the organiser of the mine workers, he couldn't have been anything but a communist. Slovo is a communist. Pallo Jordan is a communist. He said his membership lapsed — the Communist Party doesn't lapse its members, they are expelled . . . Jay Naidoo was a communist, Sisulu was a communist, his wife raised all the communists, everybody knows it . . . and also Ahmed Kathrada.

When you look back at those times and your involvement in communism, do you think that it offered a real solution for South Africa's problems, and what do you think of the prospects for South Africa today?

I don't think that they will solve the problems in the end. Maybe for four or five years. There must jump out from them [the blacks] a leader, somebody who will start saying look here, these whites have exploited you all the time, we must kick them out. To my mind it will happen — it may take ten years or so, but it will happen. They will have to have a Stalin, it won't pass without a Stalin. It's possible that they will carry on like this with the constituent assembly for a few years, then the problems will start. They won't have enough money. Mandela may be dead by then, and somebody will come up . . .

You know, if Russia had not collapsed, then South Africa would not have come to this. It is only because of Russia. These movements all over the world had the support of Russia, they got money. When Oliver Tambo went all over Europe to get money, he got from Sweden and Norway, but the main support came from Russia. After Russia collapsed, the communist parties started looking for new ideas of co-operation. If Russia hadn't collapsed, Russia wouldn't have let them do that. Also, the Americans were allies of apartheid during the Cold War, but after Russia collapsed they took on a more positive attitude towards the liberation movements.

Do you feel very Jewish? You speak Yiddish, Hebrew . . . do you regard yourself as ethnically very Jewish?

I haven't spoken Yiddish for many years. I haven't got in my library a single Yiddish book. Not that I'm against the yidden. I've got French and Russian and some Spanish, and others . . . I did a BA Honours at Unisa, in English literature. That's how it is — you lose yourself, you are getting assimilated.

So do you feel more South African than Jewish?

I can't say what I am . . . I know that I like all people alike. There are bad people and there are good people. Good people can be any kind of nationality.

Do you think that the Jews' history of oppression has made them more sensitive in any way to social injustice?

I think so. Why do the Jews participate in all the revolutionary movements? In France during the French Revolution, you had Jews there. But basically speaking, I am a Jew in the sense of the Russian Revolution. I am a child of the Revolution.

Are you more a child of the Russian Revolution than you are a child of Jewish history?

Yes. For instance, if I would have been an adult in the time of the Revolution, I would have participated with Lenin easier than with the Jews, with the Bund [see Glossary, p 629]. I would not have been a Bundist because they wanted to be separated from the other people. I am an internationalist, even today. Even when I was secretary of the Zionist Socialists, I was still an internationalist.

Do you think any of the Jews' social sensitivity comes from the Jewish religion as such?

You see, I was already an anti-religious chap when I was ten years old. I

couldn't understand the Bible. You know, I have read the whole Bible, and there are very clever things in there — for instance, Ecclesiastes is one of the finest parts of the book. It was a most wonderful book written in those years by any kind of sensible person. But to start screaming about this book that it is God and that sort of thing . . . it isn't true! You know, for a person to write like this today, it isn't a difficult thing. But in those years, yes. You see, when I was a little boy, I couldn't understand how can it be that God has made all those stars. There was once a Russian poem, and there they get hold of a little peasant boy and take him to the king. The king says, 'You clever little boy, come and tell me how many stars are there in the heaven.' And the little boy answers, 'You give them an order to come down from the heavens, and I will count them out right away for you.'

What do you think of the role of rabbis in . . .

Did you read my father's book on Dvinsk? There was a rabbi called Reb Meir Simcha. I had respect for him. That rabbi was a different kind of a man. Rabbi Harris once quoted my father. He was a Jew, but he was a mensch! My father writes there that when he [Reb Meir Simcha] was arrested by the Bolsheviks, so two Bolsheviks came and they said that he should be released. They said, 'You can't have a man like him arrested.' And they released him.

What about the rabbis in South Africa over the years?

I think Kossovsky was a fanatic! He was the Chief Rabbi around 1948. He and Rabbi Rabinowitz once walked into a hotel in Nugget Street, it was a meeting of Dvinsker *landslayt*, and they started shouting, '*Yidden, ir est nisht kosher!*' [Jews, you're eating unkosher food!] Now what kind of a rabbi is that?

I was very friendly with some of the rabbis. I was friendly with Rabbi Goss. I said to him, 'You see, people are going to the moon. There are no Jews there, and there will be none. No religion there.' He says to me, 'Don't worry, there will be a Jew there, he will take a Sefer Torah on his back, and he will climb up, and he will bring his brother, and there will be Jews there . . .' He put me in my place!

I was very friendly with him. I mean, people can have their religion, I don't mind, but they must not interfere with me. My view is internationalism. Have you read the book *The God that Failed* by Arthur Koestler, Ignas Selone and some others? I mean, I forsook the Jewish religion, but I accepted the Marxist religion. Marxism is also a religion. Now I am not a religious man at all. I'm not a Marxist any more.

So what do you hold on to when you need to hold on to something?

I don't need to. I'm an old man and I'm waiting until I'm going. That's all!

Where do you think you are going after this?

I'm going to be cremated, that's all! And that's the end of me! Look here, what is life for a person? A dog or a cat tries to preserve their own bodies, and they look for food wherever they can get it. And a human being is not very much different. He is born, he grows up, he becomes a sexual person, he marries, he has children, he looks after his children and his home, etc etc. The only thing that he must not do is interfere with somebody else, but he must carry on — and if he can help somebody, by all means! If not, he must look after himself, his wife, his children, and so on. That is my philosophy. But he must not interfere with somebody else. I mean, when these religious people come and interfere with me . . .

Do you believe in a God?

No! And also not the Marxist god. I was disappointed with the Jewish god and I'm also disappointed with the Marxist god.

LEGAL AID

What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow: that is the whole Law; all the rest is interpretation.

Hillel, Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabat, 31 A

בא לפני הלל גיירית. אמר לו דעלך סני
לחברך לא תעביד זו היא כל התורה כולה
ואידך פירושה הוא זיל גמור

הלל, תלמוד בבלי, שבת לא.

Die kind is nie dood nie
nog by Langa nog by Nyanga
nog by Orlando nog by Sharpeville
nog by die polisiestasie in Philippi
waar hy lê met 'n koeël deur sy kop

Die kind is in die skaduwee van die soldate
op wag met gewere sarasene en knuppels
die kind is teenwoordig by alle vergaderings en
wetgewings . . .
die kind loer deur die vensters van huise en in die
harte
van moeders
die kind wat net wou speel in die son by Nyanga
is orals
die kind wat 'n man geword het trek deur die
ganse Afrika
die kind wat 'n reus geword het reis deur die hele
wêreld

sonder 'n pas

Ingrid Jonker, 'Die Kind', Versamelde Werke

The child is not dead
not at Langa not at Nyanga
not at Orlando not at Sharpeville
not at the police station in Philippi
where he lies with a bullet through his brain
The child is the shadow of the soldiers
on guard with rifles saracens and batons
the child is present at all gatherings and law-giving . . .
the child peers through house windows and into the
hearts
of mothers
the child who wanted just to play in the sun at Nyanga
is everywhere
the child grown to a man treks all over Africa
the child grown to a giant travels through the whole
world

Without a pass

Translated by Jack Cope